

Hollywood actor, Inuit mask carver, youth mentor takes up knife making in latest endeavor

by **Drake Lowthers** *The Reporter*
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CLEVELAND: Eric Schweig says if expressing yourself artistically is your thing, don't limit yourself to one medium.

Born in Inuvik, NWT., in 1967 with the birth name Ray Dean Thrasher, he moved to Ontario with his adoptive family in the early 1970s. Although he was forcibly detached from his Inuit culture, Schweig always knew he was Inuit in his heart and knew his real mother was out there somewhere.

As a youngster, Schweig prodigiously sketched pictures of Inuit mothers with their babies and would carve Inuit persons in kayaks from the plentiful white pine in the area. After "graduating" from his adoption experience, he moved away from home when he was 16, and began acting in film and television in his 20s.

Getting his start as Uncas in the 1992 movie *The Last of the Mohicans* alongside Daniel Day-Lewis, Russel Means, Madeleine Stowe, and Wes Studi, some of his other credits include the Walt Disney Picture's *Tom and Huck*, alongside Jonathan Taylor Thomas, the voice of *Many Wounds* in the Western-themed action-adventure *Gun* video game, *Chief Poncho* in the Kevin Spacey and Jon Lovitz featured *Casino Jack*, along with being mainstay *Mathew Tommy* for 26 episodes of *Cashing In* and *Andy Fraser* for 39 episodes of *Blackstone*.

Schweig's resume also includes a formal apprenticeship with Vern Etzerza, a Tahltan carver from Telegraph Creek, B.C., and has been carving traditional and contemporary Inuit masks since 1998.

Additionally, he has spent plenty of his time over the years as a youth mentor, however more recently, he has taken to becoming a bladesmith, and perfecting the art of knife making.

Rolf Bouman, who is the founder of *Friends United*, advised Schweig, who lives on-site, recently came to him asking if there was an anvil and other materials, he could use to start a project.

"And all I heard was BAM!, BAM!, BAM!, for like a week," Bouman said. "And then he comes in and says, 'I've done my fist knife,' and it was like wow."

Using spring steel from a local scrapyard in Louisdale, Schweig, who has spent the past 25 years as a mask carver is quickly embarking on a journey to become a master knife maker.

"You heat it up, you smash it flat, then grind the hell out of it, and then you polish it," the 56-year-old said of the creation process. "I really like *Bowie Knives* and *Tom Brown Trackers*, so I decided to mix the two together."

Schweig started making knives, he said, because he decided to fix one of his own



personal knives while also "pimping it out" with snakeskin. Because of how detailed-focused he was on his own repair, his Sensei told him he should become a bladesmith – the art of making knives, swords, and daggers.

Speaking on the timeline a project may take, the somewhat amateur Schweig advised his first couple pieces are taking him a couple of weeks to complete.

"Now I have a bit of a system, so it's getting a little easier. It's all hand files, you do as much as you can with an angle grinder, but the rest is all hand filing," he said. "And this one was two attempts at the blade, three attempts at the usuba, and five or six at the handle, but I refuse to put out a poor-quality product, and that one drove me nuts."

Schweig noted he anticipated running into some hiccups on his first couple of knives but noted that's part of exploring a new creative avenue, an avenue he just started to stroll down this past summer.

"I got kind of tired of carving masks," he said. "We're boys, we like knives. And since I was a kid, I've loved knives."

With the suggestion from his Sensei that it should be something he pursue, which played over and over in his head like an old record, Schweig advised it was just something he needed to try, to see what he actually could create.

"Rolf came up to me and was like, 'So you just see stuff that you'd like to do, and you just start doing it?' and I was like 'Yeah, that's how you do it,'" he said. "It made sense to me to use spring steel from cars and trucks because it's already tempered, all you have to do is heat it red hot and smash it flat."

It didn't take long for Schweig to realize how strong this medium is compared to the delicate medium of wood that he was accustomed to with his mask carvings.

"You really have to fight with it to be where you need it to be. I would rather work with spring steel because it's harder to make mistakes," he said. "It takes a while to get through it, so you can't really screw it up as easily as you can, like when you're working on a mask and split it down the middle and have to start over again."

Despite years under his belt as a decorated mask carver, Schweig advised, while he's only

created a number of knives, he already likes it better than carving.

"It's more engaging. There's fire, there's sparks flying everywhere, it's noisy," he said. "Eventually I want to try something with tamahagane steel, and I don't have a proper master to work under, so it's just me sitting here trying to figure out stuff off YouTube."

Going forward, Schweig advised he wants to strictly make katanas, survival knives, his own brand of Inuit skinning knives and kitchen knives, something he's always wanted to do.

"Acting sucks, because it's someone else sucking out your blood to paint their own pictures," he said of the artistic medium. "This stuff, I can control myself the content, the execution, so I would rather do this. I've been carving from 1997, and it's getting boring."

Touching on how he met Bouman and discovering *Friends United*, Schweig advised he met him through his friend and Salish totem pole carver, Gerry Sheena, doing outreach work.

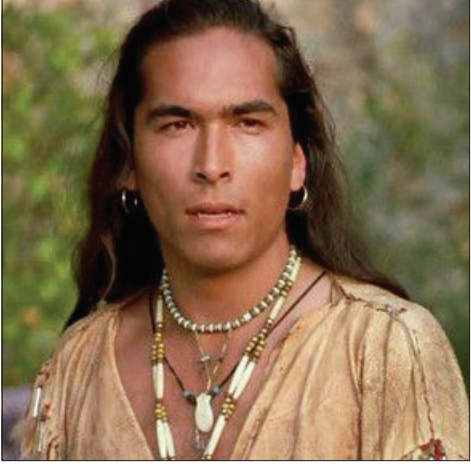
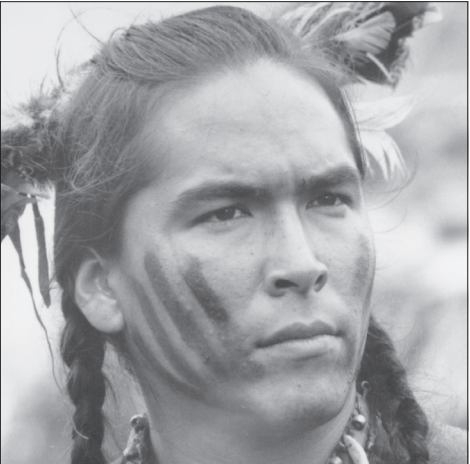
"I went over to Gerry's house, and he was carving a pole, and he was talking about *Friends United*, and I asked him what it was," he said. "This was when the whole truth and reconciliation thing came about, so I started talking to Rolf and I came out here and made some masks for him."

Which made him come to terms with the fact that Bouman was the only person he knew that was reconciling with anybody, by giving them an opportunity to create their artwork and showcasing it to the rest of the world.

Additionally, Schweig now also finds himself apprenticing under Sheena, as a totem pole carver.

Bouman, who is of German descent advised what caught his eye with Schweig, was how an Indigenous artist, who had Hollywood credits to his name also shared a German last name.

"We have a person here who acts in movies, writes scripts, makes masks, and now makes knives," he said. "He's not afraid to try new things; the story of his life is an incredible inspiration, that's why I'm so happy he's here with us, he inspires everybody."



Friends United founder appreciative of honorary diploma from NSCC

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CLEVELAND: Rolf Bouman explains he never thought he would be the recipient of an honorary diploma.

He was awarded the honour during the 2023 graduation ceremony for the Strait Area Campus of the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC).

Bouman advised one night he received a call from a person named Don Bureaux who indicated he was the president of NSCC and told him he was the recipient of an honorary degree.

After a short conversation with the man

on the phone, the founder of *Friends United* honestly thought he had just been pranked, so he called his close friend Adam Rodgers, and the pair determined it was more than likely truth rather than being a tale of fiction.

The following day, Bouman contacted Vikek Saxena, the principal of the Strait Area Campus of the NSCC, who confirmed that was in fact the case.

"It turned out, what ended up happening is, that several Indigenous communities recommended me, and for my work with *Friends United*, they honoured me," he said. "Honestly, I thought I didn't deserve it, I much rather would have seen if we could have had an artist there."

But Bureaux advised without Bouman, there would be no *Friends United* initiative, and his donation of numerous Indigenous paintings to the Strait Area Campus wouldn't have helped create an inclusive and inviting space for all learners.

"Rolf's passion, dedication, vision and unwavering commitment to providing education, promoting understanding and giving Indigenous artists a platform to share their art, culture and heritage, speak to NSCC's values and commitment to reconciliation through cultural understanding and awareness," NSCC said about their selection of Bouman. "With the support of business education and

funding to many Indigenous artists, *Friends United* is helping to support their success as entrepreneurs and cultural ambassadors."

At the graduation ceremony, he explained it provided him an opportunity to network with Minister of Health and Wellness, Michelle Thompson and the pair were able to discuss getting more Indigenous artwork into hospitals across the province.

"It largely reflects *Friends United*, so I was happy to do that," Bouman said. "It's so rewarding, you come in for a coffee in the morning, being present here is such a privilege because you get to meet so many interesting people."

Origin of the Friends United Initiative

In 1988 Rolf Bouman immigrated from Europe to Canada. Like many Europeans, he grew up with a deep respect for First Nations people, and was astonished to realize that many First Nations peoples were impoverished and underappreciated. After witnessing many unfortunate and preventable incidences of friction between First Nations peoples and other North Americans, he was inspired to do something to help create change.

Rolf, along with a team of many professionals, has been working for more than three decades to help eliminate prejudice and to focus the world’s attention on First Nations of the North American continent in a positive way. This includes celebrating the important and unique skills, cultural heritage and history of the people in collaboration with communities and leadership. Working in strong partnership with First Nations, Rolf’s goal is to emphasize that First Nations have been and are contributing significantly to the fabric of today’s society and the world. With their highly valued insights, unique knowledge and important experiences First Nations do provide a powerful worldview and perspective that will help guide our world to a better future.



From the left: Hereditary Chief Stephen Augustine and Friends United founder Rolf Bouman



National Chief Perry Bellegarde (until 2021) and Friends United artist Loretta Gould

After researching for many years and working to ensure long term funding, Rolf eventually founded the Friends United initiative in 2009. This is a forum where First Nations are gaining increasing international exposure and recognition by sharing their valuable culture through various forms of artistic expression. Many of the Friends United artists have grown to become role models in their communities as successful entrepreneurs through the business education, guidance and funding which they received through the Friends United initiative.

In 2010, former Nova Scotia Premier Rodney MacDonald joined the initiative as a guiding board member, as did in subsequent years hereditary Mi’kmaq chief and Mi’kmaq Grand Council member and Keptin Stephen Augustine, who spent his teenage years in Germany, where his family resided. Together they have been promoting and assisting many First Nations artists to become increasingly cultural ambassadors for Indigenous peoples and Canada and were able to construct bridges of friendship, reconciliation and hope by promoting dialogue, equality, and inclusion.

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The Friends United Initiative is a non-governmental initiative completely operated without financial government assistance and has absolutely no affiliation with any political parties. The Friends United initiative is being funded by the Canadian / Nova Scotian Bouman group of companies.



Hon. Rodney MacDonald NS premier (2006-2009) , Rolf Bouman Friends United founder , Hon. Stephen McNeil NS premier (2013-2021) , Hon. John Hamm NS premier (1999-2006) , Hon. Darrel Dexter NS premier (2009-2013)



Friends United at Rotary International Convention in Germany



Rolf Bouman, National Chief Perry Bellegarde, Hon. Rodney MacDonald

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