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Centuries old B.C. tree to become totem pole in Cape Breton

Indigenous artist bringing Salish culture to Unama'ki

Ardelle Reynolds · Local Journalism Initiative Reporter · Posted: 20 hours ago | Updated: 17 hours ago | 8 Min Read

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This almost 500-year-old red cedar was shipped to Cape Breton from British Columbia and will soon be carved into a totem pole and be displayed at the Friends United gallery in Cleveland, Richmond County. West Coast carver, Gerry Sheena, poses beside it for scale.
ARDELLE REYNOLDS • CAPE BRETON POST - Ardelle Reynolds

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CLEVELAND — Gerry Sheena and the 453-year-old red cedar he will soon carve into a totem pole both grew up on the West Coast of Canada.

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The woodcarver arrived in Cape Breton in late March and after the required quarantine period is almost ready to begin the art piece commissioned by his friend and founder of the Friends United gallery, Rolf Bouman, a land developer who moved to Canada from Germany in 1986.

The privately owned gallery located in Cleveland, a small rural community in Richmond County, contains an extensive collection of Indigenous art from across Canada including Inuit stone carvings, paintings in a wide range of styles, bead and quill work, woven baskets and totem poles carved by Sheena and others.



Gerry Sheena, a carver and artist from British Columbia stands with the bear he carved from a 453-year-old red cedar, also from B.C. Sheena has been commissioned by Rolf Bouman of Friends United to carve another totem pole from the huge trees that were shipped across the country by truck. Sheena took an airplane. ARDELLE REYNOLDS • CAPE BRETON POST - Ardelle Reynolds

For this latest project, Sheena is awaiting the arrival of machinery being custom-made to lift and roll the huge tree — something that will make his craft much easier, especially now that his right shoulder is giving him trouble.

The 57-year-old has been woodcarving for almost half of his life.

He met Bouman in 2019 through a mutual friend and artist and made his first trip to Cape Breton soon after. He carved a totem pole from a 150-year-old pine tree from Bouman’s property in Malagawatch, Inverness County over 20 days. It was his first time working with pine.

"It stunk. I didn't like the smell of it much," he said.

Despite the smell, he came back again a few months later and took on another project in pine but told Bouman that if he wanted an authentic totem pole for his gallery, he’d need to bring in some red cedar, the wood most often used for totem poles because it is easier to carve and less likely to split. It’s a tree species that’s in ample supply on the west coast.

Sheena comes from the Thompson and Okanagan nations, which are part of the Interior Salish peoples whose traditional territory reaches from the interior of British Columbia to Washington state. But he was raised in Vancouver, away from his traditional culture.



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He encountered a lot of racism toward Indigenous people in the city even among his friends at the time. It wasn't until high school that he started to acknowledge and appreciate his culture.

"I grew up being ashamed of my culture but, I don't know, something changed and I started taking more interest in it and feeling proud of who I was," he said.

IDENTITY IN ART

Sheena took to the art of the West Coast tribes of the Coastal Salish peoples, and had a brother who was making a modest living carving traditional art. He started helping him out and found himself fascinated with the craft.

"I said to my brother, 'Why don't you teach me how to carve,' and he said, 'Get yourself some tools and just do it,' and so that's what I did."

It wasn't an easy road though, and Sheena said it took him almost 10 years before he had his "eureka moment" and really felt like he knew what he was doing.



West Coast artist Gerry Sheena turned a scrap piece of a 453-year-old tree into this carved table, which is now a centrepiece in one of the many rooms in the Friends United gallery and convention centre. ARDELLE REYNOLDS • CAPE BRETON POST - Ardelle Reynolds

He remembers the first time he sold one of his pieces, a wooden mask.

"I still didn't have much design skill so it was just a pretty plain mask but I sold it in Seattle, Wash., for a hundred bucks American, so it was a good day and I was pretty happy."

He eventually expanded from masks to totem poles, which originate on B.C.'s coast and traditionally displayed animals and other beings to represent families or individuals, memorialize loved ones and commemorate marriages and other events.

Now, after making his way in the "dog-eat-dog" art world with his modern take on the traditional craft for more than two decades, he's being approached for commissioned pieces instead of "having to hustle" to sell his art to galleries and buyers. He's booked up for work for the next two years.

"It's basically every artist's dream."

RED CEDAR

It's hard physical work and has taken a toll on Sheena, hence the shoulder issue and other aches and pains that make the job more difficult as time goes on. But he says Bouman has been exceptionally accommodating, supplying him with any materials that will make his work easier, including the machinery that's expected any day now. He notes that is not something you'd see from other galleries.



Gerry Sheena in his workshop at Friends United carving his project

Following Sheena's suggestion, in the spring of 2020, just as the country was experiencing its first wave of COVID-19, Bouman purchased two 40-foot red cedar logs in British Columbia and had them shipped by truck to Cape Breton.

They were cut into 10-foot lengths, each ready to become a totem pole. Over nine months, Sheena carved two pieces including the huge bear that greets visitors at the entrance to the gallery.

A few weeks after the project was completed in the fall of 2020, Sheena's father died at age 92. He credits him for his connection to wood carving.

“Growing up, my dad was a logger and every day he came home smelling like wood. I would help him take his boots off and I just loved the smell of him, and so I was drawn to that smell,” he said.



Friends United founder Rolf Bouman and West Coast woodcarver Gerry Sheena in Sheena's workshop in 2020. Sheena is working on a larger piece of red cedar for his next totem pole that will be displayed at the Friends United gallery in Richmond County. CONTRIBUTED - Ardelle Reynolds

Sheena now has his own workshop next to the gallery in Cleveland where he can enjoy the warm, sweet smell of the red cedar as he works. The plan is to complete his next totem pole this spring in Cape Breton and then head home to spend time with his mother, who is also in her 90s, before heading off to his next commission.

The Friends United gallery, which also serves as a convention centre, is a former fisheries building that Bouman originally purchased as storage for the artwork. More than 10 years and \$4 million later, the 10,000-square-foot facility is a world-class showcase of the rich diversity of Indigenous cultures across the country.

Bouman is currently working with the municipality's building inspector to bring the facility up to building codes to be open to larger crowds.

For now, and following the COVID-19 lockdown, they will be able to accommodate groups of up to 40 people and visits must be booked ahead by phone.

For more information, visit its website at www.friends-united.ca or phone 902-747-2750 or 902-747-2733.

Ardelle Reynolds is an Indigenous Affairs reporter at the Cape Breton Post.

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