

## Growing Artistic Talent

How do you nurture someone's artistic talent when even they don't know what it is? Some people know at an early age that they want to paint, play the guitar, or write poetry. But sometimes artistic talent can take a long time to show its true face. Don Lipski is one of America's most acclaimed sculptors and public artists. His works are in museums and private collections, in parks and public buildings across the country. In elementary school, high school and even in college he had no idea where his unique talents would take him, or even what they were.

There were some early signs that Don had unusual creative energy. "When I was I child," he told me, "I was always making things. Doodling and putting things together, I didn't think of myself as a creative person but as someone with nervous energy." He didn't think of this as an asset. "As a child, you just want to be like all the other kids. So rather than seeing my creativity as something special, it seemed to set me apart."

In high school he spent more time drawing on his books than thinking about what to write in them. He was academically bright but bored by academic work and was rated as an under-achiever. He finished his assignments quickly, with the least effort and did just enough to get by. He was gifted in math and was moved into an accelerated math group. Even there he looked for ways to play with the rules: "A friend and I used to make up nonsensical math problems, like:



Don Lipski holding his sculptures, Scholastic Art Alum, 1965

*If a cross-eyed Woodpecker with a cork leg and a synthetic rubber beak required one half hour to peck one-third of the way through a cypress log, 53 yrs old, how long would it take him to peck out enough shingles for a 5000 square foot barn with a detached chicken half house, assuming that the co-efficient of friction between the woodpecker's bill and the cypress log is 0.5.*

The answer, by the way, is insufficient information!"

Don had a lot of creative hobbies: carving, building model airplanes and ships and designing magic tricks. "When I was supposed to be doing school work, I was often designing magic tricks or building something to use as a magic device. I always did magic shows for other kids' birthday parties. Even now, people I know from high school, remember that I was a magician."

He didn't think of himself as an artist partly because he wasn't good at drawing. He had friends who drew well, but while they were drawing he was playing with building kits: "None of that felt like real art. It was the kids who could draw a horse that felt like the real artists." Then a new art teacher came to the school and brought a revelation for Don.

"There was a rudimentary welding set-up in the sculpture department and he taught me how to weld. To me it was like magic that I could take pieces of steel and weld them together. Everything I had done before in art felt like child's play. Welding steel and making sculptures was like real adult art." His sculptures were featured in school art shows and soon he started receiving awards for them.

He still didn't think seriously about going to art school. He enrolled as a business major at the University of Wisconsin and reverted to his academic strategy of doing as little as possible. He transferred from business to economics to history, in a relentless search for the path of least resistance. In his final year, he bluffed his way into taking two electives, woodworking and ceramics, for which he wasn't qualified. He loved and excelled in both but the ceramics course had something extra: "The teacher was a very romantic and enthusiastic guy. Everything he did was like an artwork. If he was buttering his bread, he was totally into it. He was a model for me and made me think that I could make my life by making things."

Don's parents encouraged his creative work as long as it was a hobby. When he applied to Cranbrook graduate school to study ceramics, his father, a businessman, tried to drum some economic sense into him. Don agreed that studying ceramics made no practical sense, but it was all he wanted to do. Cranbrook was another epiphany.

Until then he'd had little exposure to other arts students. At Cranbrook, he was surrounded by people who were serious, knowledgeable and committed to making art: "It was fantastic. I went to all the critiques in the ceramics department, the painting, sculpture and weaving departments, soaking it all up. I visited students in their studios absorbing what they were doing. I started to read art magazines and visit museums and immersed myself in art for the first time."

After Cranbrook, he decided finally to be an artist. But what sort of artist? He had friends who'd been painters since they were eight years old and they'd always followed the same path. Even after Cranbrook, Don was wandering off into the undergrowth to explore new artistic possibilities.

"I went to teach at the University of Oklahoma and was making art, doing photography, making videos and all sorts of other things. Then I moved to New York and was finding things on the street or in dumpsters that seemed too interesting to be thrown out. I started bringing this stuff to my studio and putting it together in way that became what my artwork really is now." Over 10 years ago he was drawn into making large scale public art and found that it tapped into the same primal energies that drove him as a child.

"During public art means starting with a problem: here's the situation, a budget, a place and the sort of people who are going to be looking at it. I have to come up with a solution and then find people to build it, meet with engineers and fabricators and all sorts of things. I'm doing different things all the time, rather than having one thing that occupies my life. So there's a tremendous variety and I'm always entertained. It's really using the same nervous energy I had when I was a child."

Now Don is a parent and his 15 year old son, Jackson, is very creative. Don supports his creative work but leans on him to do his academic work. He says that Jackson doesn't need any encouragement to do the creative activities: "He's like me. If he is writing a paper, he'll spend a long time choosing fonts and doing layouts and putting pictures in rather than think about the academic part. I push him to get the academic work done before he starts working on his page layouts." Then he pauses and says, "I suppose when I'm doing that I'm forgetting my own experience."

What does Don's story tell us about nurturing artistic talent? First, and most important, there isn't a single sort of artistic talent and there isn't a simple formula to distill it. But there are some early signs to look for. Don's physical restlessness as a child, his appetite for new ideas and boredom with received ones were clear signals of his creative energies. The nature of his energies, for three-dimensional work, for doodling and carving and building, were also important clues to the natural abilities he enjoyed most in himself.

Second, finding our medium is critical to creative development and achievement. Don's abilities only became focused into true artistic achievement when he discovered particular processes, materials and styles of work that resonated with him in a deep, personal way—when he found his medium.

Third, talent of whatever sort needs encouragement and hope, especially as it's evolving and finding its true nature. Don had that from parents, teachers and friends and he sees it now as the most critical part of nurturing young talent.

Artists need the stimulation of the right creative community. For all his natural confidence and energy, Don needed the inspiration of other artists to show him that the life of an artist was possible and how it might come about. How it came about in his case was, as for all true artists, his most unique and surprising act of creation.