

Finding strength in the studio

BY ROBERT AMOS, SPECIAL TO TIMES COLONIST MAY 29, 2010

Garry Curry and Alistair Green work together in an efficient studio, carving sculptures of stone. When I visited them, Green's angular abstractions were catching the light on the windowsill and Curry was at work on a chunk of Brazilian steatite -- soapstone -- as big as a large pizza and much thicker. It depicts nine squid interlaced in a rippling and delicate pattern.

Nearby, a carving of a rattlesnake in an open coil showed his skill with harder stone. They like to work with alabaster among other things -- "nothing harder than marble," Green pointed out. They carve stone with small pointed rasps and files, some coated with tiny diamonds, which sparkle as they work.

Curry had a "lazy susan" on the workbench before him from which he could select from dozens of files by simply reaching out and picking one up with a magnet attached to the thermoplastic splint he wraps around his wrist. The file fits into a special socket with a magnetic click, the tool held there in place for maximum ergonomic positioning. This special tool holder is necessary, for Curry is a quadriplegic, 87 per cent paralyzed. Green works with a similar restriction.

"I love the physical part of it. It's a huge barrier we have broken," Green noted. Their story is the stuff of legend.

That day, Green was marking the 19th anniversary of the day he broke his neck in a drinking and driving accident. And Curry had messed up his young life, independently, in the same way. During months in the hospital, it was all they could do to blink an eye. "It took me a year to learn how to brush my teeth and feed myself," Green recalled. After two years stuck in an apartment, his life was on the way to despair and atrophy.

Disabled, yes. But here were two bright young men in their wheelchairs: intelligent, resourceful and motivated.

Fourteen years ago, Curry saw a video of Maarten Schaddelee carving two belugas out of a chunk of marble. That inspired them to get going. After filling Curry's apartment with stone dust, they began working in a basement with jury-rigged electricity and tools duct-taped to their hands. Before his accident Curry had done some chainsaw carving and had learned mechanical problem-solving at his family's small lumber mill. But it has been a long road to their current state of confidence and competence.

Curry first carved "a seal the size of your hand" -- not an easy task when you can't hold the stone and carve it at the same time. But the creative work was compelling. "We became stronger physically, and our confidence grew with every piece. The creativity keeps you going."

Each artist has a separate style. Curry loves rounded forms, while Green likes geometry. Curry's

ability is best on his right side, while Green favours the left. They have come together to solve every problem and have bonded like brothers. "We collaborate on everything -- mentally, physically, intuitively," Green said. "The camaraderie has been our life-saver."

The carvings stand on their own as artistic statements -- these are professional artists who don't need to be classified as "disabled." But, as Green said, "being disabled does change the story, and we may as well use it." They have been invited to exhibit in countless shows around the world. Their 136-kg hoary mountain marmot was seen at the Millennium Centre in Whistler during the Olympics.

And here in British Columbia, they work diligently on what they call "the societal applications of our sculpture." They have developed tools that could find wide application. Their rotating magnetic tool holder has increased the sculptors' speed of execution threefold, and greatly improved the energy transfer. With the faculty of engineering at the University of Victoria, they have developed CanAssist, a simple vise created from a car jack and electric motor.

Their studio is a huge inspiration for those they befriend and mentor.

"In here I don't have a disability," Green concluded as he looked around. "It's just all ability. I can work all day long and not get tired. My strength just builds. I just love where my life has gone!"

Alistair Green, Garry Curry and Philip Davis: An exhibition of sculpture and paintings at ArtWork Gallery, Garth Homer Society, 813 Darwin Ave., 250-475-2270. Curry and Green can be contacted through www.visoda.org

robertamos@telus.net

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