

Rip Caswell

“This Sculptor is Well Grounded in the Harbor”

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“What is it about the Harbor that instills such creativity and ambition?” This question is often asked as people realize the number of very notable, and accomplished persons hailing from Grays Harbor.

The person recognized today as one of the most accomplished bronze sculptors in America will tell you, “Growing up in Grays Harbor instills common sense, responsibility, and grounds you.” Rip Caswell, native of Montesano, knows what he is talking about. “In a small community you can’t get away with anything. Everyone knows you, and you become accountable. There is also a great sense of loyalty, and a spirit of camaraderie.”

Rip is 45 years old, creates his sculptures in his studio in Wood Village, Oregon, and has his nearby gallery in Troutdale. If you want to see bronze sculptures like you’ve never seen before, his gallery is the place to go.

Rip’s family moved to Montesano when he was in the 6th grade, and he graduated from Montesano High School in 1981. His father worked for the Washington Forest Protection Association, and the family lived in a small house at the end of Schafer Boom Road. The house was the old “boom shack” converted to a home by his father.

Rip learned his artistic skills while in Montesano, first learning taxidermy, which he sold to local hunters. With his parent’s encouragement Rip pursued his interest in taxidermy, and understudied with the renowned Taxidermist Bill Lancaster of Beaver Creek, Oregon. In the late 1980’s the two teamed up to win the 1988 Northwest Regional Taxidermy competition in all bird and mammal categories. In 1989, Caswell entered the competition on his own, and won every award.

In 1990, Rip entered the national competition, and won Best of Show, with his “Green-Winged Teal,” which combined contemporary sculpture with traditional taxidermy. According to Rip’s biography this was a turning point in that “almost everyone in the taxidermy field concurs that today taxidermy should emphasize presentation as well as technical accuracy.”

The acceptance of the inclusion of bronze sculpture in his national award winning taxidermy presentations encouraged Rip to focus his attention on sculpture. In 1992 the Caswell Gallery opened in Troutdale, Oregon.

As his recognition grows, so do the requests for his art. His life size bronze wildlife sculptures have become centerpieces for large developments, homes, museums, and major parks.

On June 25, 2007, the Tom McCall Memorial Committee, a group formed by former political associates and environmental groups, announced the commission of a “larger-than-life” bronze sculpture to honor former Governor Tom McCall of Oregon, who was known for his “wide-ranging environmental achievements.” When completed in the summer of 2008 it will be a ten foot tall likeness of Governor McCall fishing for steelhead, and will be installed in Salem’s Riverfront Park. Sandra Suran of Caswell's staff said the committee selected Caswell as the artist because of “his reputation as the preeminent wildlife sculptor in America today. He is passionate about wildlife, and an expert at portraying emotion and respect for the person being sculpted.” When you see his art, you will see how that passion, expertise, and respect shows in all of his work.

Another request announced in August 2007 is a sculpture commissioned by friends and classmates of U. S. Army Pfc. Thomas Tucker of Madras, Oregon, who was abducted and killed while on patrol in Iraq in June 2006. Caswell recently unveiled the clay model, which shows Pfc. Tommy Tucker reaching out to aid an Iraqi citizen. The finished statue will be 10 feet tall, and completed in early 2008.

Caswell’s wildlife sculptures have earned him a reputation as one of the leading authorities in wildlife art. An upcoming nationally televised PBS show will feature Rip as he creates his sculptures. The program by Producer Neil Rogers titled “Discover the Wild” will air in early 2008. Neil Rogers is attributed as saying that “he has never seen a sculptor in the United States that captures the emotion, spirit, and anatomy of an animal, as well as Rip Caswell.”

Although he probably always had the artistic talent, he never stops learning. He has made several trips to Italy, studying among the works of the great masters, where they teach to create sculpture from the inside out, by creating every bone, muscle, skin layer, etc.

His talent is self-evident, however, he will tell you that without the mentorship of three very special people in Montesano, his life wouldn’t be the same today.

Rip turned out for the wrestling team at Montesano High School, and at first had no self confidence, losing nearly every match. Kenichi Kanno was the wrestling coach and art instructor. Kenichi had been an All-American Wrestler at Grays Harbor Community College, and took a real interest in Rip, in particular working on his self confidence. Rip vividly recalls the defining moment in one match where he was about to be pinned, and based on what Kenichi had been telling him, “I thought. What if I really tried.” He added, “At that moment I was able to get away from the opponent, and win the match. And went on to be named the team’s most improved wrestler for the season.”

While in school, Rip began working on the Peterson Brothers Ranch for the “Gib” and “Botch” Peterson families. He loved working in the outdoors and particularly with the Petersons. It was Gib and Botch who instilled a strong work ethic within him. Rip gets very thoughtful when telling, “They were truly grounded in their work ethic and philosophy of hard work.” He said the Petersons taught him “to dedicate yourself to

whatever you're doing with your whole heart. Whether it's shoveling manure, bailing hay, bucking logs, or as a mechanics helper."

As a youth Rip managed the farm for four years, and about a year after high school graduation, Kenichi Kanno came out to the farm to visit him. Kenichi understood that Rip really enjoyed working on the farm, but knew his art and taxidermy skills should be put to use. Rip remembers the exact words Kanno told him that day. "Rip what are you doing? You can achieve much more than this." He recalled Kenichi repeating, "You can do better than this. You can do better than this. You can achieve great things."

Caswell said, "this was the seed" that changed his direction. And, he began his pursuit of taxidermy because of his interest in wildlife and the outdoors. He remembers coming back home to Montesano for Kenichi's funeral, and wishing that his former coach and mentor could have seen what Rip had been able to accomplish because of his inspiration.

Although he lives and works in the Troutdale area, he says he "always considers Montesano his home." Moreover, he considers Kenichi, Gib, and Botch as the cornerstones for whatever success he has. In addition, he added that after reading the booklet *The Harbor – a Culture of Success* he believes "the foundation experienced on the Harbor played a role in whatever success the people listed in the booklet have."

A trip to the Caswell Gallery in Troutdale will be worth your while, but if you can't make the journey, at least take a look at his internet website at www.ripcaswell.com. You will be impressed with the works of this artist who calls Montesano his home.