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ART

Men of clay

Continued from Page 1

"I had been suppressing my queerness in the military," he recalls. "I was completely suppressed. I knew I didn't like women, but I could not admit liking men."

We talk about how unhealthy the military is for gay men, how sad it is for people to hide who they are, sometimes even from themselves. Not surprisingly, Smith used alcohol to help deal with his unhappiness.

"I had a drinking problem," he shares, frowning at the memories. "I was forced into counseling to save my career. Getting a handle on my drinking, I found out my real problem."

Sounding like a man at an Alcoholics Anonymous podium, Smith announces, "I got sober and realized I was gay." He attributes his continued sobriety and happier life to AA.

This all happened before "don't ask, don't tell," so staying in the Air Force would have required even more self-censoring behavior than today's policy requires, and the penalties were even more severe. So Smith left the military.

"All that happened when I was 41," he says. "Everything before the age of 41 was survival. There was occasional joy but no happiness."

But then Smith says he met his partner, Tod Amidon. The furrow leaves his forehead, his broad shoulders relax, and his blue eyes brighten. Soon after they met, Smith discovered Amidon had an artistic side.

"He was taking a course in ceramics, and he brought some clay home from his courses one day. I discovered I had a latent desire to try sculpture. Tod handed me a lump of clay and said, 'Do it.'"

The men lived in Long Beach, Calif., at the time and for the next few years enjoyed sharing sculpting as a hobby.

Smith and Amidon then decided to live out their dream of a different kind of life. They moved to Oregon in 1991 because they had heard the state was a good place for gay people.

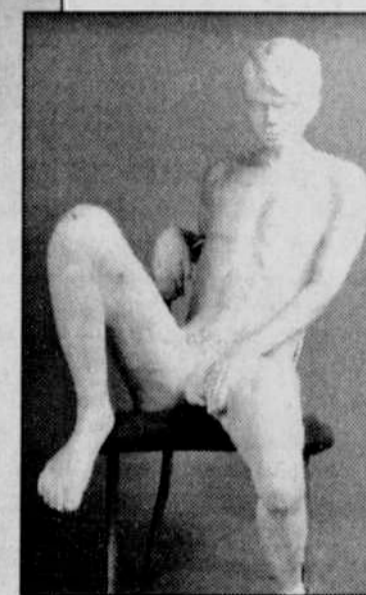
"We bought a farm near Salem, thinking we

could enjoy a bucolic, rural life. Boy, did we get caught flat-footed," he confides.

Everyone who was in the Pacific Northwest at the time remembers 1992's Ballot Measure 9 and the long battle with the Oregon Citizens Alliance. "I went to a meeting in Salem and got deeply into queer politics for the next three or four years," Smith says.

He was elected to the board of the local No on 9 chapter. "After we won, we struggled to find a new identity. We became the Coalition to End Bigotry, but the group never really found its legs." Today, the organization puts on Salem's annual Gay Pride events.

The OCA continued to harass Oregon's rural counties with 26 local anti-gay initiatives in 1993, and



This bronze fellow starts out as a clay man (inset)

Smith helped fight back as a member of the Marion County

and Kaiser Board Political Action Committee. During those years, his sculpting was on hold.

In 1995, Smith discovered Chemeketa Community College in Salem was teaching bronze casting, and he took a course. "My interest kept growing and growing," he remembers. "As my skill developed, I began to recognize that I had some actual talent. I began to wonder, 'Could I do it professionally?'"

He soon tried selling his small pieces. "My passion is for male nudes. My nudes all have a sensual, erotic flavor. So I thought there might be a market for them among gay men."

In 1997, Smith tried the Gay Pride circuit. "I got a lot of lookers but not many sales. Gay Pride does not seem to be the atmosphere where people buy art," he concludes.

Still, he didn't give up on a career as a professional sculptor. Then, in 1998, Amidon bumped into a friend who invited Smith to work with 14 other artists in putting together

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