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WEEKEND BREAK

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'The Bite,' by Cathy Johnson.



A lighthouse, carved by Johnson.

ARTIST FINDS TRANQUILITY BURNING FINE IMAGES ON WOOD

By PATRICK WEBB
For The Astorian

For years, Cathy Johnson had no outlet for her art.

After a terrible childhood and later family trauma, she occasionally took out pencil and paper to draw but a lack of encouragement stymied creativity and enthusiasm.

Then, she discovered wood burning. "I had never done anything with so much detail," she said, describing bears, whales, fish, lighthouses and even a sailing ship. "I like to make them as realistic as possible. It takes a lot of patience. You have to teach yourself."

Fueled by the soothing power of the ocean when she visits Long Beach, Washington, Johnson hasn't looked back.

"I love nature. It's very healing, nature and animals. It is so freeing to be by the ocean," she said.

Johnson began with a \$20 tool but soon invested in top-of-the-line equipment with a razor tip.

Her wood burning art caught the eye of former school friend Nellie Hux, who regularly posts scenic and eagle photography in the "Long Beach Friends of Facebook" group on Facebook.

The moment Johnson's art pieces were posted, positive comments rolled in from the site's 16,500 members. A recent post featuring a lighthouse — then an incomplete work in progress — earned 107 likes, plus kudos from Rodney Inman and Adair Faircloth, who called it "beautiful work."

Praise for her talents

Those applauding are not alone. Johnson is approaching 60. Hux has known her since grade school and they grew up in the same Vancouver neighborhood.

"I've always known how artistic she is by her horse drawings and artwork through the years being shared at school," Hux said.

Hux is a para-educator in Vancouver and a regular Peninsula visitor. After growing up together, Johnson's sister married Hux's brother.

"I've always envied (Johnson's) ability to make things so realistic in appearance," Hux said. "Last year I noticed she was trying her hand at wood burning and asked if she thought she could do one from a picture."

Works that followed featured a lighthouse and a bear. Both impressed Hux.

"She is a true artist with a gift — and ever so humble," Hux said.

Full-time fun

The success of the art has become so rewarding that Johnson left her job as an administrative assistant for Legacy Health Systems and now considers herself a full-time artist. Customers request pieces and prices may go up to \$500.

She says she sometimes sits and draws for seven hours at a time. A bear with a salmon took six weeks.

"I just treat it like a job," she said. "But it's a fun job. I know if I am not into it I have to stop, take a break and get in the mood."

Her technique is called pyrography. It involves using a burning device, which some artists call a pen, to imprint the image on flat wood. Johnson's boyfriend, Bryan, has yew at his 20-acre place in Olympia, which supplies her art.

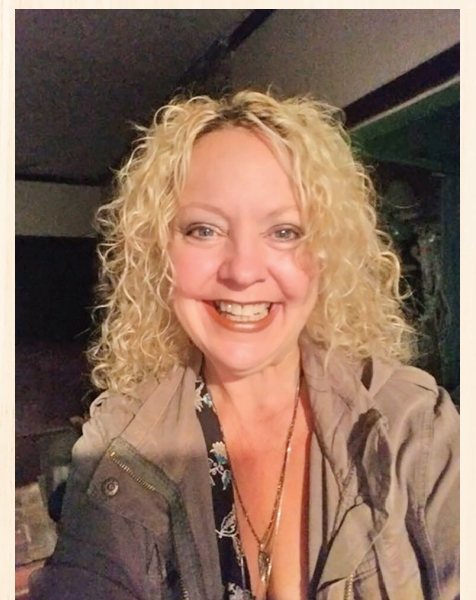


TOP: Johnson creates art using wood. ABOVE: An owl, created by Johnson.

"It's hard to find but it's a really beautiful wood," she said.

Johnson employs markings and grain

in the wood, positioning the subject atop "waves," for example. White edges that appear on several pieces are not painted



Cathy Johnson

but are actually the live edges of the yew. "You try to make every piece 'fit' the wood," Johnson said.

Always learning

Familiar outlines of Ilwaco lighthouses, bears, birds, whales and otters appear in her art, which she displays on her Facebook page, "Smokin' Wood Pyrography Art."

One piece shows the Lady Washington sailing vessel, with considerable authentic-looking detail in the rigging.

Like artists in other mediums, Johnson prefers not to repeat subjects.

"I will continue to do lighthouses," she said.

Johnson delights in mentioning that only one spoiled effort has ended up on a discard pile.

"Most pieces you start with a really light burn. If you make a mistake it is not a problem," she said.

While teaching herself, Johnson read extensively and watched YouTube videos. She adopted concepts from experts like Betty Edwards, who have written about right/left brain artistry.

She researches pictures for inspiration; sometimes people who ask for custom orders will send an image. One technique embraced by other artists is to draw a subject upside down.

"Then you draw it — you see what you see, not what you want to see," she said.

Moving east

Next for Johnson is a move 300 miles inland to Tonasket, in central Washington state, 20 miles from the Canadian border. There, she plans to live off the grid at her boyfriend's and build a solar-powered cabin with a generator back-up, trying it out next winter before locking into the idea.

But she pledges to continue her art — because of the joy it brings to others.

"I like making people happy. The Long Beach community inspires me," she said. "I was always told that I wasn't good enough and needed to get better."

The positive Facebook responses have warmed her.

"I am my own worst critic, because I know where the mistakes are," she said. "But they are kind of like the pat on the back I never got ... It's healing and therapeutic. I'm thriving."

Patrick Webb is a former managing editor of The Astorian.