

WSC Unveils New Sculptures by Alumnus Josh Tobey

Oct. 1, 2010 -- Although he has charted his own course, sculptor Josh Tobey ultimately has followed in his father's footsteps, though not by intention.



Pictured with "Western Challenge" are Josephine and Josh Tobey and Sue and Jim Oates.

Initially an aspiring professional fly fisherman and guide, Tobey found his calling as an artist at Western State College of Colorado (WSC), where his late father, artist Gene Tobey, "paid" for his tuition with a piece of his artwork -- an elk sculpture called "Windsong."

And now, like his father, Tobey also has left a legacy on the WSC campus in the form of two bronze sculptures, which were commissioned by Gunnison residents Jim and Sue Oates.

"It's neat to share this space with my dad, which is one of the reasons why this project is so special to me. It was a sweet project and I am grateful to the Oates Family for giving me this opportunity to give back this great school," Tobey said. "These sculptures also symbolize my WSC experience and the acceptance of challenge by those who come to school here."

The WSC Foundation unveiled Tobey's sculptures at a dedication ceremony on Sept. 24. The sculptures grace the south patio of the Borick Business Building. Comprised of a bronze bear and bull, "Western Challenge" represents an iconic symbol in the business world, befitting a building that houses the college's Business, Accounting and Economics Department (BAE).

"I am thrilled with how they turned out," said Monica Newman, BAE chair. "The faculty couldn't be happier with them, although some have quipped that maybe we should only have the one sculpture -- the bull -- to represent the stock market."

The idea for the sculptures was born at the Borick Business Building's dedication in Sept. 2007 when Jim Oates, a philanthropist and friend of the college, presented Foundation director Tom Burggraf with a check and a vision for artwork to enhance the building.

"As Jim handed me the check, he said, 'Great buildings need great art to inspire the people within them to do great things,'" Burggraf recalled. "And here we have the birth of a Western icon with these sculptures."

While looking for ideas for the project, the Oates were inspired by Gene Tobey's elk and bear sculptures on the campus (the bear, "Pathfinder," was the tuition for Josh's sister, Jami, who also is an accomplished artist. Asking Josh, who is a sculptor like his father, to bring their vision to life seemed fitting for the Oates Family.

After years of planning, sketching, sculpting (300 hours spent on each), molding and firing, the sculptures were finally installed at their new home in front of the Borick Business Building.

Mounted on a three-foot-high flagstone bench, the bear and the bull are poised facing each other, ready to charge. They have a smooth, patina finish with rich, brilliant tones of copper and bronze hues that invite touch and interaction. And that's exactly what Tobey wants people to do with the sculptures. At 400 pounds each and standing about 34 inches tall, the sculptures are constructed to withstand weight, as Tobey expects students will sit on them as his classmates did with his father's sculptures.

Tobey uses his memory, not models, when he sculpts. The figures come to life based on his impression of the subjects. For Tobey, his guiding principle when sculpting is not "does it look real," but "does it look right." Sculpting in this manner allows him freedom to create and add character to his sculptures. It's a technique he started to develop while at Western, Tobey said.

Although his father was an accomplished artist and his sister was studying art at Western, Tobey had plans to pursue his passion for the outdoors by majoring in recreation with a minor in business. But after taking an art class with Al Caniff, professor and chair of the Art Department, Tobey was hooked and changed his degree track to a bachelor of fine arts with an emphasis in sculpture. He graduated in 2000.

Today Tobey has studios in Santa Fe, N.M. and Port Aransas, Texas, and a foundry in Texas. He also owns a gallery with his wife, Josephine, in Santa Fe called The Gallery at 822 Canyon Road. His sculptures are part of private and public collections, including Booth Western Art Museum and the Na'Aina Kai Botanical Garden in Hawaii.

In addition to "Western Challenge," other pieces of Tobey's art are on display in the Quigley Gallery at WSC through Oct. 19. The gallery is located in Quigley Hall and open weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.