

# Art lovers bring to life massive lakefront sculpture

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Suzanne Weiss , HTR Media Published 4:14 p.m. CT Dec. 25, 2014 | Updated 4:15 p.m. CT Dec. 25, 2014



(Photo: Sue Pischke/HTR Media)

MANITOWOC – The ambitious idea was conceived four years ago on a cocktail napkin full of sketches and notes.

It has materialized in a Manitowoc area studio into three larger-than-life American Indian figures made from blue foam. The main focus is a young man portaging a birch-bark canoe. A young woman accompanies him and an elder greets the newly arrived couple.

When the project is done, it will be a 3.5-ton, 16-foot tall bronze sculpture standing along the Lake Michigan shore midway between Manitowoc and Two Rivers. Completion is still about two years away.

"There won't be another sculpture like this in the Great Lakes region, both in size and subject matter," said Joseph Metzen, a member of the board of directors of the project, named Spirit of the Rivers.

He and internationally renowned artist R.T. "Skip" Wallen, who was born and raised in Manitowoc, were poring over that cocktail napkin at a Manitowoc hotel in 2010.

"I took him out for a beer and planted the seed: 'Would you consider doing a legacy piece for your home town?'" Metzen said.

When asked whose idea it was, Wallen and Metzen simultaneously point to one another, respectfully sharing the credit.

Wallen, 72, who splits his time between his Manitowoc family homestead and Juneau, Alaska, with his wife, Lynn, has created more than a dozen major sculptures that can be found across the United States and abroad.

## **'Everyday life'**

This sculpture won't commemorate "a great battle, a major scientific discovery or cataclysmic event. This is just everyday life of a bygone era," Wallen said.

"We wanted to find an interesting subject matter to tell a story that isn't usually told," Metzen said. "What can we do today to make a difference for generations to come in both communities?"

The catalyst for the subject matter was a video series featuring Manitowoc, which glossed over the area's earliest inhabitants, he said.

American Indians make up 80 percent of the human occupation of the county, said historian Kerry Trask, also a member of the board. "People were here 8,000 years ago," he said.

"They had been depending on the waters, the aquatic life, the rice and they'd been building watercraft out of bark. The canoe has a history, too. It's a refined piece of technology," he said. "The birch-bark canoe is to Indians what the horse is to Western culture."

The sculpture depicts an important piece of Manitowoc County history as an "antecedent for our marine tradition," Wallen said.

Ironically, Wallen's father was part of that tradition when he worked on building the Peto submarine in Manitowoc. When Wallen was born, his father wrote: "I found a skipper for the Peto. Jan. 3, 1942." Wallen, whose initials stand for Richard Thor, has been known by the nickname Skip ever since.

The sculpture has broader meaning beyond the area's maritime heritage, he said.

"It's an allegory for life's journey," Wallen said. "The tribal elder is on shore to welcome these people. He's not only showing them where they can set the canoe down. In an allegorical sense, he knows where the tribe has been and where it should be heading."

## **Foam and clay**

The figures are made from rigid foam and clay. When completed, they will be cut into pieces and sent to a bronze foundry in Oregon, which will create molds from which to cast the pieces. Experts will weld together the bronze pieces and add a final patina.

A great amount of research and painstaking attention to detail has gone into this work, down to the clothing worn by the figures, which represent not one particular tribe but local Indians from the Algonquin linguistic family.

Wallen worked with later photos of Native Americans, paintings, museum collections and written accounts in his quest for authenticity.

The sculpture has been an engineering challenge for Wallen, who has been working closely with experts at the bronze foundry as well as the University of Wisconsin-Madison engineering department.

"I wanted the clean lines of the fellow carrying the canoe, but in order to do that, we have to consider the weight and wind factors," he said.

Steel rods running from the statue to the granite foundation will hold the central figure in place, said board member Carol Wergin.

The backpack carried by the female figure will lend additional support, she said.

### **Creative process**

Wergin has been fascinated watching the creative process as Wallen works at his Spirit of the Rivers studio at 822 Franklin St., in the building that formerly housed a car showroom, bridal shop and church.

She compares the foam pieces to a miniature bronze of the statue that was made by the artist during one of the early steps of its creation. Wallen didn't like the composition when the three figures were arranged together, so changed the elder figure so that his right arm is outstretched and the left arm holds a staff, Wergin said.

As he was using his mother's leather-working tools to refine the face of the sculpture of the woman one day, he pushed in the clay and the rigid foam beneath it so that she would have more defined cheekbones, she said.

Then, as Wallen was looking at the sculpture from the ground, he wasn't satisfied with the expression on the woman's face as seen from that angle and has plans to move her mouth up a bit.

"I look at it and I think it looks great, but he doesn't," Wergin said. "That's why his statues come out so great, because he pays such attention to detail."

### **Mariners Trail**

The sculpture will stand along the Mariners Trail in a large green space between the state-owned rest stop and the wooden Two Rivers sign on Maritime Drive, across the street from Aurora Medical Center.

The spot is where, historically, Native Americans would have brought their canoes to shore.

Manitowoc Mayor Justin Nickels, in one of his columns, called the sculpture "a newsworthy undertaking as a collaborative public art project between the cities of Manitowoc and Two Rivers as well as a destination point for visitors for decades to come."

The piece will "serve as a high-quality cultural/historical tourist attraction, generating direct economic benefits," Two Rivers City Manager Greg Buckley wrote in a letter of support.

The volunteer board is seeking all private funding and is guiding the overall project. Other board members include Judy Goodchild, Patrick Gagnon, Jeff Dawson, Carole Witt Starck, Mary Snyder, Tom Van Horn and Cherilyn Stewart.

Cost of the project is expected to be between \$800,000 and \$900,000.

For more information and donation possibilities, contact Spirit of the Rivers at P.O. Box 513, Two Rivers, WI 54241, call (920) 793-7214, e-mail [spiritoftherivers@gmail.com](mailto:spiritoftherivers@gmail.com), visit the website, [www.spiritoftherivers.org](http://www.spiritoftherivers.org), or visit Spirit of the Rivers on Facebook. All donations are tax deductible.

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