



Robbins begins sculpting an eagle on the grounds of a senior-living complex.

# A cut above

**“W**hen I was a kid, I kind of idolized my dad when he was doing chainsaw work,” **Mark Robbins** said. He’d watch as his father wielded the power tool to do fence work and cut firewood. His father also whittled small figurines, a hobby Robbins took up as a teenager in the 1980s.

“We lived out in the middle of nowhere,” Robbins added.

His mom coaxed him into going to an event her company was hosting with the promise of all-you-can-eat food, not mentioning that there would be a chainsaw carver.

“I’m stuffing my face, and this old boy pulls up in this beat-up old

Dodge pickup, pulls this big log out of the back of his truck with a simple chainsaw,” Robbins said, adding that, within a couple of hours, the man had carved a 5- or 6-foot-tall column of wood into a beautiful salmon jumping out of water.

“I remember kind of standing there, slack-jawed with half a hot dog hanging out of my face just in complete awe,” he said.

Though the Colorado Springs, CO Branch 204 member was blown away, “life gets in the way of everything,” he said, and he didn’t get into carving with a chainsaw until about 10 years ago—an activity that would not only become a rewarding hobby for himself but also would allow him to contribute to the well-being of others.

Robbins had a massive tree in his front yard. “It’s breaking the sidewalk, breaking the curb, breaking the street,” he recalled. He and some friends cut the top of the tree off, reducing it to about 9 feet.

He saw his perfect opportunity for a first carving but wanted to practice first. “I started carving smaller stuff, getting ready to tackle this 9-foot project that’s still growing out of my front yard,” he said. “And the first one was garbage.

“So, I refocused, looking at library books, thinking [chainsaw carvers must] take the small 4- and 5-inch hand-whittling carvings and just scale it bigger,” he said, before realizing that the proportions would be off.

Robbins, who began delivering mail in 2005, had studied architectural drafting for a few years prior to his postal career, but realized that it didn’t exactly translate. “Some of my beginning stuff, you know, there was a lot of straight lines, and I was like, well, bears don’t have straight lines,” he said, joking that it was “a bit of a learning curve.”

His next attempts were better. One book showed a 4-inch dolphin. “And I thought it was beautiful,” Robbins said. “So, I carved it taller, about 2 feet out of maple. And one of the guys I worked with asked me, ‘Would you be interested in selling it?’ ”

The co-worker then commissioned a new piece, a 4-foot bear. “If you like it, great. If you don’t, you don’t owe me anything,” Robbins told him, but the new owner was “happy as heck.”

“And I was like, well, I’ve got me a new hobby,” Robbins said—and he hasn’t stopped since. He finally tackled the tree in his front yard, creating a double-sided 7-foot “old man in the tree.”

And although he’s studied other people’s work, he puts his own spin on designs and developed his own style. “Over the years, I’ve kind of gotten settled into what my bears look like,” he says.

Being a letter carrier has gone hand in hand with his hobby. Robbins will see tree services while delivering and befriend the workers to later source the wood for his art. “It’s all wood that’s coming down anyway, and either usually goes to a recycle yard or a firewood pile,” he said. “They’re happy for me to take it off their hands.” He’ll even get calls and texts from co-workers about piles of wood or a tree service dropping a tree to come pick up after work, or customers or carriers referring him to people for carving jobs.

Robbins usually carves on his days off and on weekends. How long a carving takes depends on the size of the piece, though practice and upgraded tools have made a difference. A 5-foot bear used to be an all-day project, he says, but it now will take only a few hours. “Last carving show I did, I was carving out some 2-foot bears in 30 minutes,” he said. “Better, more powerful, sharper tools produce a carving faster, of course.”

Red cedar is his favorite wood to work with because of the beautiful colors, but there’s not a lot in Colorado, he says, so he mostly works with pine.

To do a carving, he uses a large chainsaw to grind the wood down before using a specialized carving bar to refine the details. Afterward, he sands



**Robbins puts the finishing touches on the eagle.**

or deburrs it to smooth edges, and then either burns it or paints on an oil-based polyurethane as a protectant.

He makes some carvings in his backyard but also does some on site, such as on someone’s property or at events a few times a year. He was a special guest at a Washington State Association of Letter Carriers convention, where he did a live chainsaw carving, and he has done a state convention in Colorado. And, he has donated pieces

To add contrast to and protect the wood, he burns it with a torch.



for MDA auctions that have raised thousands of dollars to send kids to MDA Summer Camp.

Though Robbins has a presence on Facebook under “Robbinswood Carvings,” most of his sales are through word of mouth. He also likes to do summer shows and street fairs in some Colorado mountain towns. “One does a gold rush summer street fair, and so they actually build me into their program,” he said. “They really bill it up like I’m somebody, and I don’t feel like I am.”

But it was an event called Working Warriors six years ago that helped his hobby take off. Robbins, who served in the Army for eight years, including in Kuwait, was invited by an Air Force veteran friend who owned a distillery to a large fair showcasing nearly two dozen veteran-owned businesses and nonprofits. There was a huge turnout.

“The main draw was having a chainsaw carver doing live performances,” Robbins said of the veterans event.

After that, the carrier got a call from an event planner at a five-star hotel the next day to book him as entertainment for a future event at the hotel.

That was the turning point, he said: “I had to turn it into a business. Had to be licensed, had to be insured.”

A decade in, Robbins isn’t quite sure how many carvings he’s done. “It’s gotta be in the hundreds, if not into

the thousand bracket,” he said. “But there’s a handful that are my favorites.”

That includes an almost 6-foot bear. “Back in 1998 there was a great big tree [in Colorado] that had a bear crawl up it. The bear had gotten lost, got tired, climbed up this big tree and fell asleep in the top of the tree. One of the neighbors called the homeowner of the house and said, ‘You got to turn on the news; your tree is in the news.’ ”

Years later, when a heavy, wet snow broke up the tree, the owner asked him to carve a big black bear “to kind of memorialize that tree,” he said.

Another favorite came about when a T-6 Robbins knew was delivering to a 13-story senior complex. A tree maintenance worker jokingly asked his co-worker if he knew a chainsaw carver. “And he’s like, ‘Matter of fact, I do,’” Robbins said. “While I was doing the carving, the manager of the building brought out barbecues and ice chests, brought out a bunch of chairs, so the tenants that lived there would come out. I thought it was hilarious that I was the entertainment for the weekend while I was carving out this giant [10.5-foot] eagle on their front lawn.”

“I have to admit, I do like a little attention,” he said of doing events. “When I turn my chainsaw off, they’re like, ‘Oh my God, I don’t know how you found a bear in that piece of wood.’ ”

Commission prices for his pieces vary from around \$50 for a small carving up to about \$1,000.

In the beginning, he said, “I was making a bunch of 4- and 5-foot carvings, and everybody was like, ‘Well, we brought the Cadillac. I can’t get this home, you know?’ ” Knowing that, plus doing regular 30-minute shows, helped him plan accordingly. “I had

to regear my thought process to make smaller, faster carvings,” he said.

Robbins, who currently serves as branch vice president and state vice president, hopes to wind down his postal career in a few years and concentrate full time on carving. “I already have it as a business, but I plan on opening my own shop, like a retail shop and carving studio,” he said, adding that he feels lucky that the hobby pays for itself and the tools that go with it.

Most of all, Robbins said, his hobby is “really therapeutic. [You] put on hearing protection, and you kind of just tune everything else out.” **PR**

