

SSND woodcarver to be featured on WCCO

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Wood carving nun

Sister Mary Ann Osborne stands near a sculpture created out of a tree trunk from one of her brothers. Carved into the wood is a pictorial description of the School Sisters of Notre Dame's history in Germany and the United States. The nun's spacious and sunny studio is in Good Counsel's Florian Hall. Photo by Pat Christman



MANKATO — Instrumental Christmas music at a low volume sets the mood as Sister Mary Ann Osborne prepares for her 10th annual exhibition on the campus of Good Counsel. The School Sisters of Notre Dame nun often plays religious music while she carves sculptures and designs wood-block prints.

She also listens to songs from the 1960s, maybe something by Simon and Garfunkel.

"Sounds of Silence" however, would be drowned out most days in the studio. Sister keeps power saws and sanders in her wood shop at Florian Hall. That's where she cuts and finishes surfaces on truckloads of linden planks she regularly picks up from a business in Courtland.

Tablecloths will be used Saturday to disguise the studio's workbenches so Osborne's guests may be seated while enjoying refreshments during the "Twinkling Wood Chips" art show.

Osborne, a St. Peter native, began the art show/craft fair with her brother, Tom of rural St. Peter.

"We started this 10 years ago to let people know what is here, not necessarily because we wanted to sell things. We love having people come into the atmosphere and take a little time to reflect before holiday time," she said.

Osborne, who is hosting the show solo this year, wants her guests to use the experience as a way of getting to know the sisters as just human beings.

"I don't like to be seen as set apart from other people. Like everybody else, we struggle."

On view will be several sculptures Osborne showed in an exhibit at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis this fall. "With Passion" paired quotes from Pope Francis and the foundress of SSND, Theresa Gerhardinger, with 36 of the Mankato nun's works.

Osborne was pleased when the Sept. 27 opening reception for the Basilica show coincidentally took place during the pope's visit to the United States. During the opening, Carol Frenning, art instructor from Metro State, stopped by to view her former student's work.

"She told me my work has grown and said, 'I'll talk. You need to just keep carving,'" Osborne said.

Frenning will include discussions of the nun's carvings in upcoming presentations.

When preparing herself to create art, Osborne strives to “empty myself of myself.”

“I have to let go of what I think and let God take over and manifest Himself through the piece,” she said.

The daughter of Ray and Charlotte Osborne, who farmed near St. Peter, some of her first memories are of toys her father created out of wood — doll houses, children's furniture and a horse on a swing.

One of the works Osborne is displaying in her studio was created from a tree trunk, a gift from one of her brothers. She carved into the rounded surface a visual story of her order.

Osborne's art mission did not begin when she first joined SSND. She first taught grade school for 13 years.

“Then I took an art class in 1984,” she said.

Some time later, Osborne's name was chosen in a drawing that allowed her to travel to Europe. She spent her time overseas studying art.

The nun's spacious and sunny art studio originally was a laundry room where members washed the elaborate habits worn prior to Vatican II.

Before commissions began to take up most of her time, Osborne served on campus as a switchboard operator and as a hostess at the education center.

Visitors to Good Counsel will find Osborne's pieces displayed throughout the campus. A series of sculptures, which rotates monthly, is on exhibit in front of the chapel. The piece chosen for November shows souls being lifted upward by angels.

“I think it relates to what just happened in Paris,” she said.

Osborne has shown her works in several exhibits, including shows at a monastery in Maplewood and at Gustavus Adolphus College.

Having a successful artist on campus gives expression to the ways we are called to serve, said Sister Mary Kay Gosch, campus director.

“She is extremely talented. We rejoice in the gift ... and celebrate and support her,” Gosch said.

Among the SSND members in Mankato are outstanding musicians, others make beautiful crafts.

“We come in with many gifts with which to serve,” Gosch said.

Income from sales of Osborne and other artists' works go to the Good Counsel community.

Osborne's story will be shared with the public, thanks to WCCO television. Mike Binkley visited her studio earlier this week and interviewed her for the “Finding Minnesota” segment, which airs during the 10 p.m. broadcast Sunday.

Binkley said he had heard about the woodcarving nun several months ago. He has been in Mankato several times but never visited the sisters.

He was very pleased with the quality of Osborne's work.

“It's beautiful and there's so much of it,” Binkley said.

He also liked the hospitality on Good Counsel Hill, especially in Osborne's studio.

"I am very certain this was the first time we were served fresh-baked cookies during an interview."