

# Carving her Niche

Mary Ann Osbourne discovered what she was meant to be doing when she took up wood carving.



**Sister Mary Ann Osbourne**

By Sara Gilbert Frederick

Sister Mary Ann Osbourne was a very good teacher. She loved the children, had fun with her students and taught them well.

But somehow, during the 13 years that she taught elementary school children in Minnesota, North Dakota and Iowa, she had a feeling that she wasn't doing what she was meant to do.

Her first inkling about what she was meant to do came when she met a woodcarver at the Festival of Nations in the early 1980s. Seeing him work brought back memories of the wooden toys her father had made for her as a child and reminded her of how she had always been drawn to the weeping willow in their yard. So she asked him if he knew anyone who taught woodcarving.

That simple inquiry led Osbourne to start doing what she is now sure she is meant to be doing: wood sculpture.

"I've been fortunate that I've been allowed to do this," says Osbourne, who now lives at Good Counsel with the School Sisters of Notre Dame. "I really believe that this is what I'm meant to do."

Her journey started with a week-long workshop with a carver in Faribault. She

spent most of that week learning to sharpen her tools and make a few simple pieces, including a frame. The next year, she signed up for a two-week workshop with the same carver. Her goal at that time was to make something significant for the beatification of the foundress of her order. Although her teacher thought she wasn't ready to attempt such a project, Osbourne finished not just one but two tributes.

It was after the beatification that Osbourne approached her superiors and asked if she could have an extended period of time to study woodcarving. "They told me no," she remembers. "They said, 'You're a really good teacher.'" A year later, Osbourne asked again. "I told them that I truly felt that this was what I was supposed to do, and they said yes."

She studied with the carver in Faribault for two more years and learned the craft as well as she could. After that, she enrolled at Metro State to pursue a degree in art as well. But it was the trip she took to study with a Franciscan sister in Germany for six months that had the biggest impact on her artistic career.

In Germany, Osbourne was encouraged to let the wood speak to her rather than planning a drawing for each sculpture. It was a new way of thinking about her work, and although it took time to get used to it, it changed the way Osbourne worked.

"Those six months freed me so much," Osbourne says. "Her telling me to follow my heart and to lose my umbrella of rules was so important for me."

Osbourne still keeps the pieces she carved while in Germany in her workspace, which is now located in the building that once served as the laundry facility for Good Counsel. But unlike everything else on display in the spacious studio—from large wall carvings to small nativity scenes and stained glass pieces—they aren't for sale.

"I want to keep those pieces around me," Osbourne says. "I need the energy that I get from them. Everything is for sale, except for

those pieces."

Over the 25 years that she's been sculpting, Osbourne has sold more than 1,000 pieces. Her work hangs all over the world, from Mankato to Rome. It's in schools, churches, hospitals and private homes. In 2010, it was exhibited at the Basilica in Minneapolis, and a piece is currently hanging at the St. Paul Priory in Maplewood.

Much of it is also on display in her own studio, where she is always happy to welcome visitors and groups. Recently, another sister brought a group of school children through for a tour and was impressed by the way Osbourne interacted with them. "She told me I should still be a teacher," Osbourne remembers. "And I said, 'I am. That's what I was doing there.'"

"You don't have to be in a classroom to teach, or to help people realize their full potential," she adds. "I am still very much a teacher."