

# AN ARTIST

# ARISES

After a debilitating accident, Mike Jackson had to learn to do something new. That's when his artistic talent emerged.

*Text by Karen Olson House | Photos by Don McKenzie*

**I**t all started with the swans. Mike Jackson carved them slowly, simply. He had struggled to find new purpose since a scaffolding accident several years earlier. He and his wife, Brenda, had worked together to move on, attending speech therapy sessions, trying volunteer work around Wadesboro. But Mike was still depressed.

He couldn't return to working as a commercial electrician, his profession for 24 years. He suffered from hearing and short-term memory loss, and his hands trembled. Mike wasn't the type to do nothing, but nothing was looming as he headed, searchingly, into his fifties.

His neurologist suggested that he stay busy, that working with his hands might help. "His doctor," says Brenda, "has a sense of humor, and told him if you can't find anything else to do, pick up a piece of wood and just whittle."

Mike had painted some, but had never carved before. He didn't take the doc's advice right away. At least, until there was something worse to do—house-cleaning. "He didn't want to vacuum or do the laundry that day," recalls Brenda, a pretty, white-haired woman. "I found him with a piece of wood. He made two swans."

Then Mike carved some toothpick holders, which looked better than the swans. Clearer, more defined.

From there, the Pee Dee Electric member carved out a new calling for himself and amazed his friends, neighbors and family along the way.

## **An outlet at Fancy Crafts**

Mike's daughter-in-law kept urging his and Brenda's longtime friend and neighbor, Denise Beachum, to view Mike's work. Denise and her husband Danny own Fancy Crafts/Granny Hollow Pottery, a gift shop and teaching studio in Wadesboro. Denise and Danny have taught crafts for years, and are well-respected for their community involvement in the arts. His daughter-in-law would ask the Beachums with wonder in her voice, "Have you seen Mike's carvings?"

Danny eyed 'em first. He looked at the walking staffs with carved faces. A little man chomping a cigar. A Civil War general. "I didn't believe it," Danny says. "The talent! The talent was shining like a light!"

*His wife, Brenda, says, "Every time Mike does a piece, he wants to give God thanks for allowing him to do that."*

The Beachums began selling Mike's pieces, and customers were struck by the originality and true-to-life colors. "In the beginning, Mike wouldn't put his name on his stuff," recalls Denise. "He'd say 'Why would someone want my name on it.' He finally relented after an excited customer held up a purchase and cried 'I want my piece signed and with dates, too. This boy is going to be famous!'"

Locals began handing their family pictures to Mike, asking him to carve or mold faces and figures. Sometimes Mike would add a character prop, such as a judge's briefcase.

Some puny pumpkins also got things rolling. A man asked Danny to buy his leftover crop. "How much you want for 'em?" Danny asked, slowly. The fellow said, "Oh, ten cents each." Later, Danny considered the 10 or 12 miniature pumpkins he'd bought and wondered what on earth he'd do with them. "But Mike and Brenda stopped by and we got to talking," recalls Danny. "Mike said, 'I'll take one home.' I said, 'Here, take two.' He brought one back with this incredible face."

Danny throws pots to sell in the Fancy Crafts shop, and Mike now decorates Danny's pots with faces, birds, leaves and other decorative elements. Some look comically goofy—caricature mugs with buck teeth grinning jauntily outward. Others look human and haunting in their somber expressions. They start at \$150.

Mike also molds clay. His expressive pottery faces range from a vintage-looking aviator with goggles to exotic-looking women with shawls wrapped around their heads.

"I love working with the



*He patiently spends hours on fine pieces. A recent wood carving of an electric lineman, complete with ruffled shirt, work belt and hat, took about 88 hours.*

clay. You can rework it," says Mike, 55, a quiet, serious man. "With wood, you make a mistake, you throw it away." Like many potters, he uses a hair dryer to shape the clay.

He patiently spends hours on fine pieces. A recent wood carving of an electric lineman, complete with ruffled shirt, work belt and hat, took about 88 hours.

Mike sells his work exclusively through Fancy Crafts. The Beachums take only a small percentage of the profit from Mike's work.

Mike makes his creations in his workshop behind his one-story home five miles outside Wadesboro in the Brown Creek community. Mike made the backyard storage shed his own, erecting shelves, building a workbench, installing wiring and an air conditioner. Inside, his tools sit with the letters M J initialed on each gouge, a rainbow of acrylic paints nearby.

### A "miracle"

Whether the piece is wood or clay, Mike's body of work

reveals remarkable range. He believes it's because so many different people, each with his or her own ideas, have requested custom work. He credits Danny with sprouting a lot of the pot ideas, saying it's sometimes hard for him to come up with his own because of the head injury.

He particularly likes working with cypress knee wood, because its odd shapes inspire him. He took Best in Cypress Knee Carving from the Orangeburg County Fair's show for his carving of an elegant, long-faced lady with tan lace fanned out between her skirt's folds. He carved her from wood his neighbor had next to her fireplace, lopping off two side pieces and making her two Santas in exchange.

Other awards include honors three years in a row for the competitive, national Annual Santa Carving Contest sponsored by Woodcraft stores. His humorous 2005 entry, titled "Santa's Last Stop" shows a slim Santa, rolling his eyes heavenward, grasping a

walking stick and pulling a small sled with a few toys left.

The civic-minded owner of the McDonald's in Wadesboro erected a large cabinet to show off local art and displays several of Mike's pieces, including "Santa's Last Stop."

Producing versatile pieces has been a learning experience for Mike. "It has been a struggle, but it does seem like it comes natural to me," he says.

He typically works about 10 hours a day in his

workshop. "I think that's what's helped me so much. I stay with it every day," Mike says. His grandchildren sometimes sit by him, coloring pictures as he works. Habit-forming, he calls it, and relaxing. "I don't think about nothing except that piece of wood that I'm carving."

Brenda calls it a miracle, his carving, and notes how fortunate it has been that the Beachums had talents that were instrumental in helping Mike with his own.

She also credits prayer. "Mike prayed that his life would have meaning. He thinks God has blessed him with this. Every time Mike does a piece, he wants to give God thanks for allowing him to do that."

The couple, who will celebrate their 35th anniversary this month, has few of Mike's pieces in their own home, "because everything he makes has sold," says Brenda, laughing. But the two small, roughly carved swans are still there, where it began anew. C

*When Danny Beacham first saw Mike's carved walking staffs, he didn't believe it. "The talent was shining like a light!" Danny says.*

