Impossible to take the artist out of the art instructor

By Susan Wood

Despite being out of the public eye of college life, a longtime art instructor has remained rock solid in his commitment to sculpting.

Four years ago in June, David Foster left his post of 32 years at Lake Tahoe Community College. The fixture of the local institution began focusing much of his time on his own pieces – "steps away" from his log cabin home on Tahoe Mountain. The 1,600-square-foot studio is Foster's version of his man cave. The gallery is upstairs, but most of the action happens downstairs.

The studio is dotted with sculptures, mostly marble – his stone of choice since touring Pietra Santa, Italy, where artists go to work and follow in Michelangelo's footsteps. Foster, 69, gleams when he talks about the artists' haven, as if fantasizing about one day being one of the 90-plus-year-old sculptors who call the place home.

David Foster's attention to detail allows him to create impressive works of art.

Photos/Susan Wood

After glancing around the studio, it’s easy to see that moving seems out of the question. Marble weighs 160 pounds per cubic foot, a reality that surfaced when his wife Joanne lifted one of the pieces while fleeing their home from a racing Angora Fire a year before he retired.

“That’s true love,” Foster said, referring to her selecting irreplaceable valuables to pack. She grabbed one bronze and one marble works of art.

Foster felt helpless that day. He came out of Scotty’s Hardware and noticed a huge plume of smoke from the North Upper Truckee area moving northeast toward his house.

“The sun looked red,” he recalled. He scrambled up to a rock outcropping off Echo View Estates, but by the time he drove to Sawmill Pond, an El Dorado County sheriff’s blockade was set up and he couldn’t get home. After a quick call and a carload of valuables, the Fosters met up at his LTCC office and waited patiently for their next move. Ash and cinders fell on the campus grounds.

Foster sighed.

“If the fire would have hit the studio, this marble piece would have turned to white powder,” he said, while running his hands through a pile.

Foster grew up in eastern Iowa where his father worked in a stone quarry. Taking over the business was his father’s dream, but not David’s. He wanted to do something else with stone.

“I told him: ‘Dad, I gotta study art’,” Foster said, with the conviction of a J.D. Salinger’s “Catcher in the Rye” coming of age passion.

That he did. Then, he spent three decades teaching others –

after a brief reprieve as a driver's education instructor. For that: "I have stories," Foster said of the job.

Foster misses some components of teaching. He often filled the figure sculpting classes, employing a slew of nude models. Some of the students still keep in contact. He had an incredible knack for teaching – sometimes reminding the wannabe sculptors to carve "realism, not idealism" when it comes to working with live nude models. The students made Foster and longtime colleague Phyllis Shafer proud every year during the annual student art competition.

His teaching methods may have come across as unconventional at times. He recalled holding up an art book one might keep on a coffee table and called it a "coloring book."

"If they were having a hard time, I could tell from the book (not being highlighted and written on)," he said.

Foster has kept ties with the college by bringing President Kindred Murillo to his home for a tour. The artist was commissioned by a college patron for a piece called "Discovery." The sculpture will sit near the library and stretch 12 feet to the sky. It's being created in honor of a patron Kit Barkley's husband because of his flying background.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for the college to have a lasting piece of (Foster's) work publicly shown," said Melonie Guttry, who works for the LTCC Foundation.

The piece that has consumed him "for too long" he says represents a cross between a woman and cello. The aptly named "Donnacello" dominates the art studio as the centerpiece. Small shards of grinding rocks and other tools lay under the piece. After hours of "sanding," the shards take on the shape of the sculpture because the stone is usually harder.

He admits one must be in shape to take on this hobby. Foster is also a regular fixture at Sierra Athletic Club. His

patience is satisfied by moving from one piece to another. The heavy pieces get moved around by a 1-ton crane he bought for $200 and later retrofitted for his own use for $800. There’s a hatch between the two studio floors where a pulley system transports the pieces from one floor to another.

The studio came about in 2005 after his carving dropped white dust that floated into the house from the garage and settled on the grand piano. His wife’s hands on her hips let it be known the art needed a new home.

Before Foster selects what to sculpt, he surveys the stone yards like a true shopper. Then he studies how the stone may be situated in such a way to give the piece motion – for example, balancing on a corner. The trick teaches the appreciative art eye to stare in an attempt to catch the piece moving. Think of the Mona Lisa.

He draws it then makes mini versions of the sculpture called “maquettes.”

“I try to find something that’s never been done before,” he said.

With its Portugal marble crystals glowing in the light, the Donnacello serves as an ideal example.

“I wanted the relationship of the figure and cello to unite,” he said, while lightly stroking the smooth figure.

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