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SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT
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"Windjammer," a bright steel form at the entrance to Railroad Square Art Park, is one of Mark Dickson's public sculptures.

'It was like I was on fire'

Welding sparks sculptor Mark Dickson's creativity

Welding sparked artist's imagination

Mark Dickson worked with the late Master Craftsman Jerry Grice

By Randi Atwood

Special to the Democrat

Sculptor Mark Dickson credits a great deal of his artistic inspiration to his paternal grandmother.

"She was very involved in the Oakland Museum as a volunteer and docent, in California, where I grew up," he explains. "She also had a collection of abstract modern art, which I was exposed to from a really young age. She was sharp and smart. She'd tell us about the abstract artwork, and ask us what we saw and how we felt about it."

But Dickson never considered art as a career for himself. He believed that in order to be an artist, you had to be able to paint and draw, neither of which were his strengths. He didn't discover welding and steel sculpture until he was almost 30.

"When I was in high school they had classes in photography, ceramics and even a drafting and architecture program, but I never took them," he remembers. "I look back and think, 'My god, they had stone carving and I never made the connection.'"

Since he always gravitated toward the creative fields, in high school Dickson ended up taking other artistic electives like choir. After graduation, he traveled for three years with a non-denominational religious theater company that performed community outreach plays dealing with peer pressure, suicide, drugs and alcohol.



StarMetro commissioned Mark Dickson to create this 11-foot-high, 600-pound sculpture, which incorporates pieces of old buses, in 2010.

"Then I was in a passion play in Gatlinburg, Tenn., for another three years," he recalls. "We were a cast of about 40 people, and I played Christ six nights a week during the tourist season with no understudy."

As much as he enjoyed performing, Dickson still gravitated towards the visual arts, doing much of the design work for the show.

"I was happiest when I was designing props and costumes. I would

spend hours making those Roman costumes look good," he laughs. "I took great pains and put a lot of effort into it."

Tired of traveling, Dickson moved back home to California, where he took a job as a landscaper and heard about a course in welding at a junior college with a technical program.

"It was a night class, and after much coaxing from my wife, I signed up for it," says Dickson. "It was an intensive sculpture class with an emphasis on



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FOR TALLAHASSEE/LEON COUNTY

IF YOU GO OUTDOOR PUBLIC ART

Visit COCA's new Directory of Outdoor Public Art at www.cocanet.org/outdoorart to view more than 140 public sculptures, murals, windows, memorials and monuments in our community. The guide offers a view of the iconic, historic and quirky works of art that enhance Tallahassee's natural beauty. It includes public art from civic and university collections as well as corporate and community artworks. Photos and detailed information about each work are provided, as well as a map that can be used to create tours.

welding and metal fabrication. It changed my life. By the second day, I knew that was it."

Soon after, Dickson and his wife moved to Tallahassee, her hometown. By that time, Dickson was completely consumed with metalworking and sculpture.

"It was like I was on fire," he remembers. "I was introduced to (the late sculpture professor) Charles Hook and they found a way for me to take two of his classes. I practically lived at FSU. I did iron pours and aluminum

and casting, until they finally asked me if I wanted to be the sculpture lab monitor!"

Dickson continued meeting local artists, metalworkers and blacksmiths. He wanted to work with the late Master Craftsman Jerry Grice so much that he offered to sweep his studio floor. He apprenticed with Grice in blacksmithing and ornamental metal fabrication.

"Slowly but surely I learned all these practical applications," he explained. "Jerry taught me how to build amazing objects."

Now Dickson, at age 40, has his own business, Mark Dickson Studios. He creates his own artwork and takes on outside projects in which he draws on knowledge acquired from his independent studies in metal design, fabrication, casting and blacksmithing.

"For the last 11 years, I have spent thousands of hours in the studio, usually starting at 6 in the morning and sometimes going as late as 9 at night," he says. "I'm still working two days a week on practical welding projects, but these days I'm almost entirely able to support myself with my artwork."

Dickson is one of the many artists represented in COCA's new Directory of Outdoor Public Art, the

only guide of its kind in the capital region. His public sculptures include "Windjammer," a bright blue steel form at the entrance to Railroad Square Art Park, and "Transit," which is located outside StarMetro's offices on Appleyard Drive.

StarMetro commissioned Dickson to create the 11-foot-high, 600-pound original sculpture in 2010, using funds from the Federal Transit Administration Art Enhancement Program, which provides grant monies to agencies to incorporate local art in the design of their transit facilities.

Dickson wanted the sculpture to represent the transit system in more ways than one.

"When I proposed the artwork, I asked them if we could incorporate pieces of some old buses. They loved the idea and gave me body panels and old rims," he explains. "The wheel behind the sculpture is two different bus rims that I cut in half and welded together. What's exciting for me is if you stand here and look at those wheels, you can imagine the life that they had when they had tires around them. Those objects have a story to tell."

Next up for Dickson is a commission for Valdosta State University's Education Department.

"It will be a giant figurative piece, almost like a guardian," explains Dickson. "It's getting so big that I'm going to have to move my whole studio around to finish it."

To see more of Mark Dickson's work, visit www.markdicksonstudios.com. — Amanda Karioth Thompson contributed to this story.