

## Portrait of a carver

The elderly First Nations man limps towards Oppenheimer Park, as he does nearly every morning, bearing the weight of his bum knee on a copper-coloured cane.

If Oppenheimer Park sounds familiar, it is because it's an infamous park, a park with a 100-year-plus history, a former home to tent cities for the homeless and the centre of what was once Vancouver's thriving Japan town.

And yes, it's in the heart of that neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside, one of the poorest zip codes in Canada: a place where you can get high on crack or compassion.

Like this park, he is a man with a history. His name is Dalbert Alexander Weir, but everyone calls him Alex.

His life began 69 years ago on Haida Gwaii, where as a boy he used to watch the elders carve in Masset village. At 14, he started working, going wherever the work was, where the liquor was good: fishing in Alaska, logging on Haida Gwaii, a security guard in Seattle. Others say he was a renowned dogsled musher. He also went to 'Ksan village near Hazelton and learned from the master carvers.

Over a decade ago, Alex ended up drunk and injured in a Vancouver hospital. As he began to heal, he started carving again. With the carving came the will to stop drinking.

Alex is such a fixture in this community that even though there is already a line-up for coffee at the Park's field house, he doesn't have to wait. They let him go to the front of the line.

One city employee says he keeps giving and giving and giving: chocolates to the girls, cigarettes to the guys, jokes to everyone.

Alex fills one Styrofoam cup, and then his well-worn travel mug.

After coffee, and hot dogs, Alex begins to carve back in his room at the seniors lodge one block away.

With a block of cedar in his hands, he is transformed. He sits up taller, his whole aura lights up and his hands begin to shave away slivers of golden cedar that fall in curly-cues around his feet. He can see it. Beneath the wood, there is a mask waiting. A dogfish.

Carving is Alex's way of making ends meet but over a year ago, someone stole his tools from his home. And by doing so, they stole his livelihood.

He didn't stop carving. He bought blades for \$5 from second-hand stores and fashioned rudimentary handles, but it was hard to do the quality of work he was capable of.

Sandy MacKeigan, who manages the field house at Oppenheimer Park, helped Alex apply for a grant from a new program funded by Vancouver Foundation and run by the Carnegie Centre. The Downtown Eastside Small Arts Grants Program was a one-year pilot program established with \$100,000 from Vancouver Foundation and its donors to help emerging or struggling artists who live or work in the Downtown Eastside. A total of 68 grants of \$500 to \$1,000 were given to artists like Alex.

"This program shows what can be accomplished with small amounts of money," says Vancouver President and CEO Faye

Wightman. "We wanted to help artists in this neighbourhood take their work to the next level. For many artists, it was the first time they've ever applied for a grant; the first time they had to develop a budget or plan a marketing strategy."

Wightman describes the project as an overwhelming success, and says, "Vancouver Foundation is looking for ways to keep it going – seeking out other partners or donors who will help us expand this program to more artists in the Downtown Eastside."

For Alex, the \$1,000 grant meant he could replace some of his lost tools and buy raw materials. It also meant that he became one of a group of artists; his masks and paddles were displayed alongside the work of 40 others in a group show at Centre A last June, where he sold one of his masks.

Like Alex, each of the artists have their own story. They are painters and poets, jewellery makers and photographers, dreamers and cynics. For some, a small grant of

\$1,000 is an incredible stamp of validation. For others, it might be the help they need to make something out of their art, whether it be a little extra income, or a livelihood. There is so much artistic potential trapped under a veil of poverty; so many ordinary extraordinary people with an amazing vision or talent, trying to find their way in one of our city's toughest neighbourhoods.

Just like Alex Weir, an elderly man who comes every day to Oppenheimer Park.

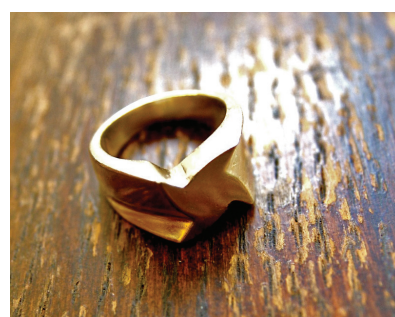
Downtown Eastside artists funded with a small grant from Vancouver Foundation – see more at [www.vancouverfoundation.ca/smallarts](http://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/smallarts)



Painting by Brenda Dallaway



Mask by Alex Weir



Jewelry design by Ghassan Shidian



Beadwork by Ron Horsefall



Photography by Louise Francis-Smith