

Hartland man sculpts career out of pain

Local carver pursues passion, overcomes arthritis pain with art

By **STEVEN MARTINEZ**

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Our *Reel to Real* series features local stories inspired by the silver screen. In each issue during the holiday season, watch for stories that highlight Lake Country people and places. Today's story focuses on overcoming adversity, a la *George Bailey* in "It's a Wonderful Life."

One morning during his five-year tenure in the military, Bryan Berenson woke up feverish and hurting all over.

He wouldn't find out until much later — after years of doctors appointments and chiropractic procedures — that the pain, which he felt for the first time in his life that morning, was caused by reactive arthritis, an autoimmune condition that usually develops in response to an infection in another part of the body.

By the time someone presents with symptoms, the trigger infection has often been cured, which can make it difficult for doctors to pinpoint the exact cause of the arthritis.

"It literally happened overnight," Berenson said, but he's been dealing with the pain ever since.

He's unable to stand or sit in one place for very long and is a bit of an insomniac.

He also couldn't have known that on that long-ago morning his arthritis would much later change the course of his adult life, would, in fact, change all his postmilitary educational and professional plans. But he's glad it did.

"I'm a religious person," he said, "and I truly believe this is what God wants me to be doing with my life."

Berenson, 49, now spends his days, and some of his nights, in a small workshop attached to his Hartland home, chipping



Staff photo by Steven Martinez

Bryan Berenson is a carver from Hartland who was diagnosed with reactive arthritis but pursued his love of carving despite his condition.

and carving away at blocks of wood and stone.

Like the character George Bailey in the 1946 Christmas classic "It's a Wonderful Life," Berenson has discovered that a person's life is never completely ruined by strange and sometimes unfortunate circumstances, and that the pursuit of one's passions usually requires sacrifice and perseverance.

From 1982 to 1986, while he was in the Army, Berenson worked as a mechanic and loved it.

"I was always interested in mechanical work and asking 'How does this work?' and 'Why does this work?'" he said, so he decided to pursue mechanical engineering after serving his time in the military.

He studied at the Milwaukee School of Engineering and did well in his classes — "I got all A's," he said — but his wife,



Jenni, knew about his unusual sleeping habits and thought the tightly structured schedule of a regular day job might not be the best thing for him.

Berenson, like a good husband, realized his wife was probably right and stopped thinking about a career as an engineer, which left him free to pursue his longtime love of carving. He said that soon after making that decision he and his wife stumbled across an article

advertising for a sculpting school in Austria and decided to take a vacation there to check it out.

And that's when he had his light-bulb moment.

"I fell in love with (carving)," he said. "I knew it was for me."

Berenson participated in the school's apprenticeship program for five years, finished in 2004, then this past year decided to pursue certification as a master stone and wood sculptor.

He's already completed seven of the required 11 weeks, and will return in February to finish the final four.

All his hard work appears to have paid off. He said he's struggling to keep up with all his commissioned projects and mentioned that his business tends to pick up around the holidays.

He's also busy carving pieces

for two nativity sets; one for his family and the other for his parish, St. Charles Catholic Church in Hartland.

But Berenson said the thing he's perhaps most excited to do, once he gets his master's certification, is pass on the knowledge he's been so grateful to receive.

"There are not many people in America doing what I do. It's kind of a lost art," he said. "Maybe in the future I'll be able to train some other people to do this and keep it alive."

He added that from time to time he wonders about what his life would have been like if he hadn't given up his pursuit of engineering, but said he knows his body couldn't have survived the rigor.

And the satisfaction he derives from his carving is too complete to be any kind of mistake.

"I'm at peace," he said.