

BEHIND THE ART: PHILLIP SEEWALKER

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Phillip Seewalker proudly poses with one of his finished teepee wood models

The pride is hard to miss.

"When I first started making these, I didn't think they were going to look that good," said Phillip Seewalker, a resident worker at Rough Rider Industries (RRI). "As I started doing them, they were getting better and better – way better. My own ideas were popping into my head, and I said, 'Oh wow I can do this now, I can draw like this.' And I didn't know how to paint, and I didn't know how to draw that good, but I started looking at ideas and started doodling."

If you've ever walked into the showroom at RRI, you've probably noticed a wooden teepee or two. In fact, it's like a game of 'I Spy' because they have them displayed throughout the showroom floor and in offices. Each teepee is intricately designed and painted by Phillip.

"Every time I do something like this, I put it on a piece of paper first," said Phillip. "All my little designs, I draw them out like that, and I start putting them on my teepees. And they all represent something, sacred stuff, it's all good meaning, nothing bad, everything's good."

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Phillip hand-drawing his design prior to painting and finishing



Phillip displaying his hand-crafted feather beads



Phillip presenting images of his finished teepee collection

And although he will tell anyone he's still learning, his passion is evident in each teepee he makes. He is always trying to come up with something new; utilizing the library and speaking with elders has been a way for Phillip to not only learn more about his family's history, but to learn about other tribes and their symbolisms and colors.

"There's a lot of things that I'd like to do to make them more beautiful," he said. "I'm getting better and better at making them and they're getting better and better and I'm getting more ideas as I'm doing it... I think they'll pop off, man. One of these days I'll say, 'Ah, I'm getting tired of doing them.' No, I'm not, I love doing them."

Each teepee takes Phillip, and a couple other RRI workers helping him out on small tasks, about two days to complete. The first day is picking out the wood, cutting it down, and putting it all together. The second day is typically drawing, painting, and adding in the small details.

"When I first did it, I made homemade ones out of wood," said Phillip. "I made feathers like this. I cut wood up, I drill holes in there and then I paint them, and I make them look like beads."

"Every teepee I put together now, I got all these beads on them that represents the four directions. So, if I'm going to do another, it might have a different color on them because it might represent something else. If it's all white like this, it might represent healing. The white is for somebody I'm praying for and they're sick. It's a good thing."

Working on the teepees has brought Phillip a sense of peace with his past life and has provided more clarity and positive thinking. He often speaks with the younger men to show them that they, too, can be creative and find supportive hobbies to help them change.

"It's good, it helps me relax," Phillip said. "It gets me away from all the drama inside. Because there's a lot of drama in there and I don't like to put up with it. I guess when I was younger, I was the same way, you know, a hell raiser; but now that I'm getting older, you look back on it and man, that was all wasted time."

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"When I paint and I draw, it takes all that stuff away. It puts me in a good mood, it makes me a lot healthier. And I love helping everybody out. I never used to be that way; I used to be stubborn, ornery, I used to not really give a damn. Now that I got older, the headlights kind of brightened up. And now it's like, 'See, I need some help!' 'Yep, I'll be right there.' I just drop everything and go help whoever out. And it makes me feel good inside. It's what I like."

Working at RRI has provided Phillip with the opportunity to learn new trades and bring his creativity, that he didn't know he had, to light, and encourages other residents to consider working for RRI.

"A lot of people that are in there, they don't want to work because they're used to doing their own thing out there," he said. "So, you come in here, you got a lot of time and you come here, and you start working in here. Things are going to change, you're going to change, because you're going to love the job you're doing. Because you never had the skill and once you start doing it, you're going to start loving it."

Phillip even said he wakes at 3 a.m. in the morning, something he never used to do, because he's so anxious to come to work. Aside from making teepees, he's usually the first one there to hand out tools to everyone, a job he takes very seriously.

"I whistle real loud because if I'm missing something, I whistle real loud and they'll say, 'See, what are you missing?!' And somebody will come and start looking at their tools," he said. "'I'm missing an extension cord,' and I'll say, 'So how do you like your job?' 'Well, I like it.' 'Well, don't be forgetting about your tools, man!'"

"I worked in the kitchen for five years before I started out here. I didn't think I would like it out here when I came out here. I love it out here now. Five years in the kitchen and six years out here and I'm planning on retiring out here."



Phillip showing his "brand" he engraves on the bottom of his teepees



The first teepee Phillip created; originally designed as a birdhouse

