

An amiable hummingbird inspired a big piece of art

When Dempsey and Shelley Essick's daughter, Beth, was 14 or 15, she was dealing with some health problems. One day, while she was out on the patio drawing, she noticed a hummingbird sitting beside her. It didn't seem to be sick or hurt. Yet it let her pick it up and cradle it in her hand.



Kim Underwood

"I was at home in the studio working on a painting," Dempsey Essick said. "I heard her calling me rather urgently.... She was petting it on the head."

He ran back inside and grabbed a camera. It was still there when he came back, so he was able to capture the moment.

"We latched on to that as a point of inspiration," he said. "We thought it was a sign from God that she was going to be all right," Shelley Essick said.

In the 11 or 12 years since, their daughter has been fine, and Dempsey Essick, who makes his living as an artist, has painted a lot of hummingbirds.

Sometimes, a hummingbird gets its own picture. Sometimes, it appears as a "hidden" image made up of twigs and leaves and such in a picture that has a different main subject. He paints with transparent watercolors. Some people call his style "realistic." He prefers the term "natural."

Sculpture of ... you guessed it
Hummingbirds in one form or

another have become central to the products at Dempsey's Place, the shop that he and his wife run in Welcome. Along with prints of his work, people can buy hummingbird puzzles, hummingbird pocketknives and hummingbird hand towels. So, when Dempsey and Shelley Essick started thinking about commissioning a sculpture to set up outside their shop to grab people's attention, one featuring a hummingbird was a natural choice.

A couple of years passed before Dempsey Essick found the right people to do it. In the fall he commissioned Casey and Emily Lewis of Beechwood Metalworks in Burlington to make a piece based on his design. Extensive consultations followed.

"We wanted to make sure that everyone was happy," Casey Lewis said.

On the last day of April, a steel, brightly painted sculpture of a ruby-throated hummingbird feeding from a day lily was planted in front of the Essicks' shop.

Lewis has made fairly big sculptures for museums, nurseries and hospitals. But this one sets a personal record both for biggest flower and biggest hummingbird.

The sculpture is either 12 feet or 14 feet tall, depending on whether you measure straight up from the ground or along the gentle arc from the base of the stem to the tip of the hummingbird's wing. The size was chosen to complement the building the shop is in. The sculpture has definitely done what the Essicks hoped. When some people see it for the first time as they drive by, they turn around and come back for a better look.

"It's a nice conversation piece," he said. Dempsey Essick didn't

want to reveal the cost. "It was several thousand dollars - let's put it that way," he said. Essick is 54. He was an engineer and painted on the side until he was in his 30s. After a number of people asked whether a painting that he was having framed as a present for his wife was for sale, they decided to make reproductions and see whether they would sell. All 500 prints were gone in less than four weeks. He painted another picture and those prints quickly sold out, too.

"It was one of those magical things," he said. He was encouraged to see if he could make a go of it professionally, and, within a year, he was able to give up his engineering job. These days, one of his originals may sell for \$10,000. He prints his reproductions in runs of 999 and prices most of them in the neighborhood of \$100.

The demands of the shop and promoting his work keep him from painting as much as he would like. But he is still able to create eight to 10 originals a year. He likes to paint bluebirds, too, as well as landscapes and still lifes. At the moment, he is working on a covered bridge.

The detailed work he does requires a lot of patience. "Thankfully, that fits my nature," he said.

When he's in the midst of working on a painting, he can get so wrapped up in it that it's almost as though he's in a trance. "He goes days when he doesn't speak," Shelley Essick said with a laugh.

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JOURNAL PHOTOS BY BRUCE CHAPMAN

BRIGHT SPOT: A large sculpture of a hummingbird with a day lily sits outside Dempsey's Place gallery.



DEMPSEY ESSICK

BIG COLOR: Casey Lewis of Beechwood Metalworks in Burlington crafted the sculpture to Dempsey Essick's design.