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Lafayette Artist Delivers Funky Custom Mailboxes

By Cathy Tyson



Ken Hughes Photo Cathy Tyson

It all started a number of years ago when teenagers came through a quiet Lafayette neighborhood and smashed mailboxes. Structural engineer and homeowner Ken Hughes looked for an artistic solution and voila, the mailbox dog was born.

Fashioned entirely of scrap materials, Hughes thought it was funny - a snarling dog to ward off future vandals or perhaps a menacing mailman; now the rebar pooch is facing a custom-made and equally charming mystery-creature mailbox across the street. "I always try to have a sense of humor working on the mailboxes," said Hughes.

A mainstay of the neighborhood for twenty-seven years, seems like everybody loves Hughes. He creates these fantastic mailbox designs in his spare time in the garage. "Space is a challenge," he said, "I have various types of welding equipment and wood working tools. Most of it I pick up second hand or from contractors I deal with." Because he works with steel fabricators on projects, he'll ask if he can go through their scrap pile. Reflecting on skills that come in handy at work and with his hobby he says, "My appreciation of good design detail helps me be sensitive to what an architect wants."

About five years ago, Hughes made a lizard mailbox for long-time family friends, the Lenzis, who had re-landscaped their front yard. "We just feel honored. He's amazing; we are so proud of our mailbox," said Marty Lenzi.

Some designs just come to him, others are a team effort with the homeowners - it's not surprising that the surfer-guy mailbox belongs to surf aficionados. "The coyotes and coco-pele, (musicians), are a southwest theme for my

friend that loves New Mexico and Indian country. The dragon is for someone who loves dragons," said Hughes.

Throughout the home he shares with wife Joanne there is evidence of the fun and function in his designs. "Buns of Steel" is a clever bookend, with one end looking around the edge to see his counterpart sitting down on the job and reading a book.

A custom-designed fence with laser-cut leaves and dainty frogs graces the front of the ranch-style home. A side gate incorporates wood and metal along with a recurring leaf motif that uses a uniquely positioned golf club shaft as part of the closing mechanism.

Hughes gives credit to the former architect and current art mentor Joe Bologna as the source of his original inspiration. His clever "Bash me Buddy" piece, made out of rebar, motivated Hughes to harness his creative genius. Bologna is now a full-time artist and, "the proud owner of a large scrap pile of metal," from which he plucks pieces he turns into sculptures. Although he prefers steel, he also works with clay. Hughes has a large hilarious ceramic head of Bologna by Bologna in his home, with a statuesque nose and partial halo of nails for hair.

If you look closely at the sculpture garden gate at the Lafayette Art Gallery - across the street from Chow - you'll see a collaborative piece by the two men. Bologna did the sign portion above the pathway, and Hughes did the gate itself. Look closely and you'll see four 'Buns of Steel' men trying to break in.





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[back](#)

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