



PORTRAIT BY MARTHA BUSSE

Harry Whitehorse

## The Trees Have Soul

The many works of Harry Whitehorse connect local nature past and present

**IT'S HARD WORK,** making eagles out of trees.

When Harry Whitehorse opens the door to his garage, a cloud of wood dust drifts across a floor strewn with orange extension cords and power tools. Varnish and epoxy, the twin aromas of a workshop, testify to painstaking fitting and finishing. Through the haze, two enormous birds of prey peer fiercely, waiting to be released.

"That one is Fishing Eagle," says Whitehorse, pointing to the larger bird, carved from basswood to appear frozen in mid-swoop. Its outstretched wings measure eight and a half feet.

The second eagle, by contrast, evokes stillness. Its sleek, abstract form offers no hint of the struggle it put up, emerging from the trunk of a two-hundred-year-old bur oak tree. This one will soon have a home on Madison's near west side.

Edgewood College commissioned Whitehorse, a Madison artist and Ho-Chunk elder, to create Standing Eagle (*cax sep nazí* in the Ho-Chunk language) out of the oldest oak on campus, removed last year because of root

rot. The sculpture represents the eagle-shaped earth mound from which the tree sprang.

Whitehorse, seventy-nine, is known for his ability to transform hunks of metal and wood into graceful forms that seem ready to growl, speak, or take wing. A son of Annie Greencrow Whitehorse, the noted Madison educator, Harry Whitehorse has been making art in the Madison area for more than sixty years. His works can be found in parks and public buildings throughout the city.

**Whitehorse has created commemorative sculptures from downed oaks for Thoreau Elementary School and the village of Sauk City.**

"I can't say no to a historic tree," says Whitehorse, who feels a connection to his Ho-Chunk ancestors as he works.

Around the base of the Edgewood eagle, Whitehorse has carved eleven symbols representing the Ho-Chunk clans. In commemorating a tree from pre-European settlement times, he wanted to remember the people who were living then, too.

—Mary Ellen Gabriel