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The Harry Whitehorse 'Effigy Tree' is in peril

How to save the Madison masterpiece?

by David Medaris

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Harry Whitehorse's "[Effigy Tree](#)" is in trouble. Overlooking Lake Monona from Lakeland Avenue west of Olbrich Park, the sculpture has taken a beating from the elements since 1991, when Whitehorse carved it from the trunk of a hackberry tree that had been shattered by a lightning strike. Restoration in 1997 slowed but has not stopped its weathering.

Stewardship of Madison's public-art collection falls to Karin Wolf, the arts program administrator for the Madison Arts Commission. On this year's assessment tour, she says, "I got some surprises." She cites the Statue of Liberty replica at Warner Park, which "needs some serious love."

But no surprise was more crushing than Whitehorse's Effigy Tree. Wolf deemed its condition so dire during her recent inspection that she assigned it to her "Make Me Cry" category of municipal public art works most in need of rescue. "This one," she says, "is the one in the most immediate need." There are birds living in it, she notes, and lichen is growing on it.

Wolf hastened to arrange a meeting with Whitehorse. He outlined two options. One would involve removing the work to his studio for repair and restoration, and re-siting it at an indoor location. But this would, in effect, break with the work's origins in a grass-roots neighborhood-based campaign to commission Whitehorse to execute the original work 17 years ago. It would also sever ties with the sacred cluster of Ho-Chunk effigy mounds that once occupied the site, and which the Effigy Tree itself memorializes. "Relocating the restored piece would be a big issue," Wolf agrees.

The better option, Whitehorse contends, would be what he calls the "Twenty Generation Solution." Under this option, Whitehorse would repair and restore the original work in preparation for shipping to an art foundry where the Effigy Tree would be cast in bronze, and replaced on the original site.

"I am honored that the sculpture I created as a tribute to the Ancient Ones has become such an important part of the community," he writes in his proposal.

"As I think of the generations ahead, it is important to me that the Effigy Tree remains in its original home next to the mounds. Creating a bronze sculpture from the wood is a natural progression in the life of this hackberry tree. Nature prepared the tree for the sculpting process through the heat generated from that fateful lightening strike in 1990. Transforming hot molten bronze into a more permanent sculpture resonates back to the original lightening strike."

Says Wolf: "He would like to see the work be a more lasting legacy." Her preliminary estimate is that casting the Effigy Tree in bronze could range between \$40,000-\$80,000. The actual cost could fall below those figures, she adds, but "metals are incredibly expensive right now." Those are the kinds of numbers that cry out for a public-private partnership.

Toward that end, Wolf is reaching out to the community for input. She has scheduled a public meeting for 7 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 5, at the Pinney Branch Library on Cottage Grove Road. She has also sought the professional opinion of UW art professor Truman Lowe, a renowned sculptor himself as well as curator of contemporary art for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. She says he impressed upon her the historical significance of Whitehorse's Effigy Tree, and the community's attachment to it.

Wolf adds that she has also sought out the expertise of Madison-based art conservator Tony Rajer. And she is trying to educate herself regarding the feasibility of other options, including casts from other durable materials or reproducing the Effigy Tree in carved stone. She plans to report her findings to the Madison Arts Commission during its meeting scheduled for Sept. 11.

Meanwhile, the original Effigy Tree is slated for removal to Whitehorse's Monona studio in the coming week