



Janet Horsch

# JP URANKER:

## From Moon Run to Martha's Vineyard, a Journey of Success Shaped by Hard Work and a Chisel

JOSEPH PAUL (JP) URANKER ('74) is living proof of the success hard work brings. Through the craft he developed and honed since he was 10-years-old, Uranker now ranks as one of the top-notch master woodcarvers in the world.

The third male graduate of Carlow University, Uranker, who lives on Martha's Vineyard with his wife, Carlow alumna Francesca (Hoffman '74), started carving linoleum prints to make Christmas cards in fifth grade. Then, in junior high school, while his friends were learning how to cut wood for birdhouses for woodshop class, Uranker moved on to creating commissioned pieces for clients. By high school, teachers looked to him to draw visuals they could use as teaching aids in class.

Uranker has made a name for himself working from a modest studio next to his home in Oak Bluffs. Using the same German and Swiss steel chisels that he's used for 35 years, Uranker carves dovetailed sea chests, gold-leafed eagles, blanket chests, ditty boxes, boat hooks, signs, and traditional folk art.

One of his most publicized works was the 2001 restoration of the sternboard, rope, dolphins that run along the stern, and the 20-foot bow figurehead of the U.S. Coast Guard Barque Eagle, a ship that was built in 1936 at the Voss and Bohm Shipyard in Germany. Neglected for years, the Coast Guard wanted to restore the rotting carving to its original grandeur. Requesting the best in the business from the National Woodcarvers Association,

Uranker's name was first on the list. The restoration was a monumental task, but Uranker completed it in four months working 14–16 hour days.

Growing up in Moon Run, Pa., a rugged coal mining town northwest of Pittsburgh, Uranker never thought that one day he would be commissioned by clients like Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Vanguard Funds founder John Bogle, and the U.S. Coast Guard.

He says he owes much of his success to his parents—his father, who was a coal miner and a steel mill worker, and his mother, who grew up working the family farm—for teaching him the value of hard work and perseverance. In some respects, Uranker had no choice but to work after his father died when Uranker



PHOTOS BY: CHARLES UTZ



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was only 10-years-old. To help support the family and to buy clothes for school—and much needed art supplies—Uranker helped on the farm, and when he was 16, went to work at a local restaurant, where his boss taught him the business, and also taught him the skill of carpentry.

Uranker also credits his artistic success to Francesca. She was the one who encouraged a permanent move to Martha’s Vineyard from Pittsburgh where they had both been working at Carnegie Mellon (CMU) for more than 13 years—she managing the CMU art store, and Uranker restoring woodwork. During that time, Uranker also completed a master’s degree in business and public management (1986) and a master’s degree in labor relations (1987).

The couple decided to leave Pittsburgh so that Uranker, who was a member of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Society of Artists, could take his art to the next level. His last project before leaving Pittsburgh was the restoration of the George Nakashima collection at CMU.

“Francesca was the one who suggested I start doing functional art—not the metaphysical-type pieces where people have to figure out what they’re looking at. She came up with the idea of carving sea chests. It took us three years to get everything right. We’re a team—Francesca handles the business side, even though I have the degree she’s a much better business person than I will ever be, she makes the grommets and beckets, and I carve.”

Francesca’s business savvy paid off. Today, Uranker sells his sea chests to clients around the world. In addition to working hard at his art and teaching woodcarving, Uranker donates his artwork and volunteers to help organizations raise funds needed to preserve buildings on Martha’s Vineyard.

- ◀ Uranker carves a U.S. Naval officer's crest.
- ▶ Uranker carves the Winged Victory Eagle out of solid mahogany.





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- ▲ For the past 35 years, Uranker has used German and Swiss steel chisels.
- ◀ Uranker and Francesca, his wife and a Carlow alumna, work as a team.

He is also an executive member of the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish derby, an annual event that awards \$30,000 in scholarships to support high school seniors who plan to major in a marine-related area in college.

Uranker fondly remembers his time at Carlow, and not just because it was where he and Francesca met. It was here that he also gained more self-confidence and learned some valuable life lessons.

“Carlow taught me confidence,” says Uranker. “It’s not a University that just hands out degrees. It’s a school that allows you to take the little steps to get the courage you need to work hard for your dreams.”

When Uranker enrolled at Carlow, he was 21-years-old, and had dedicated 14 years to drawing and woodworking. His level of skill was already well beyond that of the average college art student’s. Even so, Uranker says that at Carlow he learned that he could do more than he ever thought.

“Carlow allowed me to spread my wings. Even though I had a lot of experience, one of the best things about Carlow was that it didn’t stifle my creativity, and my teachers respected my art, but still showed me ways I could grow,” says Uranker. “My art teachers, Sue Steiner and Dick Devlin, would nudge me in a direction that I hadn’t thought of by mentioning other ways to think about something or do something.”

While Uranker says the art part of his education came easy, it was the traditional aspects of academics that challenged him to work harder—especially writing.

“I was really good when it came to class discussions. In fact, being the only male in my class at that time, it was easy to get a discussion going especially when it involved the roles of men and women in society, but what I wasn’t so good at was writing,” says Uranker.



▲ Uranker donated “Winged Victory,” one of Uranker’s first pieces, to Carlow. The sculpture is on display in Grace Library.

“It was the sisters who taught at Carlow, like Professor Murta Mulhare, who took a real interest in me and pushed me to work harder. She was invested in helping me succeed and was very patient with me. Sometimes, I’d have to rewrite a paper several times before I got it right. But by showing me my weaknesses, she instilled more confidence in me. And I knew that if I wasn’t doing well, I just needed to work harder.”

When Uranker reflects on the life lessons he learned at Carlow he says that what changed the most for him was how he relates to women, and people, in general.

“When I started at Carlow in 1971, I believed that women went to college to get married so they could raise smart sons. As you can imagine, most of the women in my classes certainly didn’t believe that—especially at that time in history. But, luckily, I learned just how smart and multitalented women were. I learned that I better know what I’m talking about before I open my mouth. That experience

changed my entire outlook on how I related to women, and others as well.”

Most importantly, Uranker says that in addition to bolstering his already staunch work ethic, when he was at Carlow, he learned the value of having an open mind and trying new things.

“I’d rather be the kind of person who is always trying to improve than be the person who doesn’t think they have to improve,” Uranker says.

“Carlow pushed me to excel and to always learn as much as I can. I do that today when I’m working with clients. I’m always eager and open to try new things, to figure out how to do something different. It may mean I have to work harder to make it, but that’s what I’ve always done.

“What can I say? You can take the boy out of Moon Run, but you can’t take Moon Run out of the boy.” ■