

A new way with clay

Ray Silver's grandfather, now 83, started working at the Clayburn Company's Kilgard brick plant when he was 15, feeding the kilns with coal and learning everything there was to know about brick-making.



Ray Silver works on a brick mural that is the “show piece” for a new venture operated from the brick plant owned by Sumas First Nations and located on Sumas Mountain Road. The enterprise involves developing new products – incorporating First Nations art – from the clay obtained at the base of Sumas Mountain.

John Van Putten

His father also worked there over the years, and Silver spent many of his young days hanging around the plant before he, too, learned the trade.

Now, the family – with its almost 70-year history there – is among those working to keep the plant from folding during hard economic times.

They are involved in a new enterprise that combines brick-making with First Nations art. Se:math Industries was formed in June to look at new brick products and ways to market them.

Their primary product is brick murals – First Nations art carved into the clay obtained from the base of Sumas Mountain. Silver is the artist behind the work, and he learned the trade from his dad, who shares the same name.

Silver is also the chief operating officer of Se:math (the Sto:lo name for Sumas).

Rahul Lakhote, Se:math's chief executive officer, said the 98-year-old brick plant, which was purchased by Sumas First Nations in 1979, was at risk of dying. As stone became more popular in the construction industry, brick sales decreased and the plant began to suffer.

Lakhote is partnered in business with **Brad Boyes**, and the two help to revive struggling companies. Boyes and Silver are friends and began talking about ways to save the brick plant.

“I wasn't willing to see a 100-year-old company fall apart and be dormant,” Silver said.

The trio joined forces earlier this year – Boyes is the chairman of the board – and began discussing ways to make money that would also respect the First Nations heritage behind the operation.

Silver's dad had previously created some brick murals, but Lakhote said the product was not marketed well enough to produce significant sales.

This time, they don't want to keep it a secret. Silver completed a mural that will be shown, starting today, at the Interior Design Show West in Vancouver in the “New Designers on the Block” section.

The idea is to attract designers and builders who might want to incorporate such a piece in their projects – whether for an individual home or a large development.

Silver's piece is a re-creation of a print he completed a couple of years ago, featuring two salmon jumping towards the centre and creating a face. He was inspired by the Fraser River.

"It's a large part of who we are as a people ... and our dependence on salmon," Silver said.

He and his dad are both established artists known for their totem poles, sculptures and paintings. Now he's enjoying working in clay.

"This is just something new for me to work with ... a lot of artists are like me in that you get tired of something very fast."

The Se:math Industries trio are now looking at other artistic ways to incorporate brick – for example, using coloured glazes – and to market the products over the Internet, at trade shows and through industry connections.

Involvement from others in the Sumas First Nations community will be highly encouraged.

"We're trying to involve some pride in ownership," Silver said.

For more information, visit semath.com.

Covered by Vikki Hopes, published September 16, 2009 3:00 PM

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