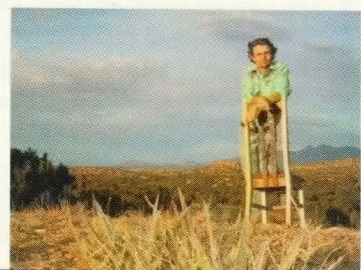




He Wanted a Place to Sit

IN HIS PASSAGES FROM VIRGINIA TO NEW MEXICO AND BEYOND, BEN FORGEY'S IS A STORY OF HOW ONE MAN CAME TO FIND HIS PASSION AFTER HIS PASSION CAME TO HIM.



By KRIS Brown

The mission statement of Forgey's Rio Grande Rustics furniture design company is "To design and promote artifacts which bring intelligence, joy and a sense of the 'power of the creative hand' to households." His work has drawn attention from galleries and magazines that pay attention to those at the top of the craft, often because function is such an important element of his designs.

Forgey grew up in Waterford, a village of 200 that provided the backdrop for his earliest inspirations. His mother, Julie Lea, still lives in Waterford and is an accomplished multi-media artist. In 1982 Forgey graduated from Loudoun Valley High School, then says he "stumbled on" to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, where he spent the next seven years of his life. Graduating in 1990 with a bachelor's degree in history, Forgey made his way to Algodones, New Mexico, driven by a desire to go somewhere totally different from his native Loudoun.

He found the job market for history majors far from idyllic. "There are a lot of well-educated people here, just not very many jobs. Unless you're building nuclear bombs," he adds. With time on his hands, Forgey began picking up driftwood that caught his eye during long walks in the countryside. Having traveled to New Mexico by motorcycle, he had no furniture and decided to make a chair from the wood he was collecting. The year was 1993 and Forgey wanted a place to sit while watching the Redskins on television. Without realizing it, he had

stumbled onto rustic furniture making.

Within New Mexico's sparse population reside some of the most talented artisans in America. Rustic furniture makers there are among the best, frequently showing their work in galleries all over the United States. "Just in Santa Fe there are over 200 galleries, some on par with the one's you'll find in LA and New York," says Forgey. "You can buy a Picasso in Santa Fe."

In Algodones, "People saw my chair and liked it," says Forgey. With a fairly dismal array of job prospects, he decided to try his hand at selling furniture at the renowned Santa Fe Flea Market, which Forgey describes as a sort of world bazaar. He began selling there regularly and soon found his first big customer in Robin Summers, a collector of rustic furniture and owner of American Spirit cigarettes. Summers purchased a number of pieces from Forgey and gave him a lot of advice about business.

Fate was starting to take over. Within a week of meeting Summers, Forgey was approached by Jian Carlo Cei, a scout for Time Space Research Unit—a company specializing in finding furniture and décor from America to bring back to Italy. Cei's first reaction to his work was "I like—ah your product," Forgey recalls. "Italians are really in tune with furniture, and luckily, they liked the way I went

about it. The proportions were right and they felt it was a really nice take." It had only been six months since Forgey decided to give furniture making his full attention. His pieces were now showing in Milan, the venerable furniture capital of the world.

Time Space continued showcasing Forgey's work for two years. By then, he was benefiting financially from the accolades and finding himself very busy. Six years had passed since Forgey began making furniture and he was beginning to wonder where things were heading in his life. "I had just finished up a restaurant, working three months by myself. I made 100 chairs and 25 tables and I was just like, 'I am done with furniture!'" he recalls. Forgey embarked on a three-week hiatus to Italy, a decision that would become a turning point in his career.

Once in Italy, Forgey began looking up former associates from Time Space whom he never met face-to-face during earlier dealings with the firm. His timing couldn't have been better. His work was popping up in magazines all over, including Architectural Digest Italy. Forgey's three-week vacation turned into a yearlong sojourn. He was hosted by the Doni Family of Florence through his friend Mario Gierrotto and began work on the over 150 pieces he made during his stay. Forgey's trip was not only productive, but at times a bit surreal. "I was passing the statue of David and the *Duomo* on my way to the hardware store," Forgey recalls. While in Italy, Forgey had three gallery showings and was featured in roughly 90 magazine articles.

Forgey's work is assembled from the stuff of nature, with no two pieces being alike. He often

starts with driftwood collected from wherever he happens to be at the time. In New Mexico, he gathers from the banks of the Rio Grande—making upwards of 30 trips per year. Forgey fashions chairs, sofas, tables, coat racks, and lamps from the wood, finishing the chairs and sofas with cowhides, mud cloth or other upholstery. His work is not limited to driftwood. He often incorporates other found objects and wood into his pieces, some without any driftwood in them at all.

Since his time in Italy, Forgey appears busier than ever. Among his most recent projects was a collaboration last November with his mother on the set design for "Delicate Balance," a work choreographed by Harvard's head of dance, Elizabeth Bergman, and performed by the still Moving Dance Company of Shenandoah University in Winchester. Right after finishing that project, Forgey left to show his work in Barcelona, Spain.

Recently, he put the finishing touches on The

Lizard Rodeo, a bar in New Mexico. As with most of his projects, he conceptualized and created the entire arrangement based on a loose idea put forth by a client. Forgey's creations for the space included what he called "The Dying of Thirst Chairs," which resemble skeletons with cowboy hats, and two huge chandeliers woven from barbed wire. Currently, Forgey is completing work on the house of world-renowned landscape architect, James Van Sweden, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Forgey enjoys being able to come back east to work on projects like the Van Sweden house and Delicate Balance.

Asked if he'll ever move back, Forgey says, "I love Virginia. Virginia is a beautiful place. I'll probably stay out here in New Mexico though, just because the market is so much better for what I do. I don't believe I could have done what I've done without being here."



Pictured clockwise from left: The Santa Fe easy chair, one of Ben's signature creations; a pair of Gypsy King chairs; and a console table by Forgey.