

→ Sidewalks



By Rick Kogan, left
Photos by Charles Osgood



Jeffrey Breslow, a former toy-maker, uses wood he finds on walks on his property in Vermont to build sculptures.

Life: Take 2

Acclaimed local toy-maker Jeffrey Breslow shifts gears into sculpting career

Though F. Scott Fitzgerald famously observed, in notes for his unfinished novel, "The Last Tycoon," that "there are no second acts in American life," second acts are common, and in many cases more intriguing or potentially interesting than the acts that came before.

Consider Richard M. Daley, about to start his second act, and thinking of writing a book.

Or remember Norman Maclean who, after a distinguished three-decade career as a professor at the University of Chicago, sat down and wrote the magisterial "A River Runs Through It," published in 1978 and ending with some of the finest lines in American literature: "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters."

Jeffrey Breslow, 67, has been haunted by natural elements, too, and that is what he has been working with since beginning the second act of his life in 2008.

The first act was one of immense success and acclaim. For more than 40 years, he made toys and

games, first working for and later becoming a partner in the firm of Marvin Glass and Associates, and then starting Big Monster Toys. From its Chicago headquarters, Big Monster Toys has produced hundreds of toys and games for companies such as Mattel, Hasbro, Milton Bradley and Fisher-Price.

The industry magazine Global Toys News estimates that Big Monster's toys have been or are in 85 percent of U.S. homes. Breslow, along with partners Howard Morrison and Rouben Terzian, were inducted into the Toy Industry Hall of Fame in 1998.

Always interested in art, Breslow did some sculpting — "dabbled" is his word — before leaving his firm.

He worked in bronze but found the process frustrating. And so he started working with wood, sugar maple mostly, that he discovered on long walks on the property he owns in Vermont. "I never cut down a living tree," he says.

He combines the trees, or parts of the trees, with rocks and sometimes water to create sculptures that are whimsical and beautiful. All are crafted in his studio at 1015 West Fulton Market. (You can see some for yourself at jeffreybreslow.com.)

"It has been an easy transition," he says. "The biggest difference is this is an individual pursuit. The toy business is a collaborative effort. I never woke up in the middle of the night with a great idea but rather worked in concert with 35 other people to create toys.

Still, he feels greater confidence with each new piece. He has sold a number of them but realizes "for all the success I had in the toy business, in the art world I am just a beginner."

This ongoing second act is obviously rewarding on a level that transcends money and fame.

"Once I have the right section of wood, and an assortment of stones and boulders, I engage as many of my senses as possible while working on a piece," he says.

He will listen to music while he works and in so doing experiences "an intense connection between myself, the music, the wood, and the granite boulders."

Not a bad way, I imagine, to spend a day, or the rest of one's life.

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