

Miracle on Ice

KENNETH DIEDERICH has a cool job. So cool, in fact, that you might want to bundle up before reading about it.

WHAT DO YOU GET when you stick a giant block of ice in front of an artist in a parka armed with a chainsaw, chisels, grinders, a blowtorch and crazy carving talent? Something spectacular that you won't be sticking in your living room — unless you keep your living room very, very cold.

Creating art from the elements has never been easy, as any prehistoric petroglyph master could attest. Working with a medium such as frozen water takes it to an entirely different level, as top ice carver Kenneth Diederich, executive director of the National Ice Carving Association (NICA), tells *American Way*.

AMERICAN WAY: What attracted you to this pursuit? Are ice carvers born or made?

KENNETH DIEDERICH: Maybe a little bit of both. I've been carving since I was 16, while working as an apprentice for a chef who was nice enough to let me use his tongs and chainsaw to create my first ice pieces. (My very first piece was a swan.) I was half that age, 8, when I watched the head chef of the Visalia Country Club in California carve and display a few pieces. It instantly hooked me.

AW: In a frozen nutshell, what do you love about ice carving? Does it attract a certain "breed" of artist?

KD: Ice carving is beyond unique. I love how it forces you to work, adapt and create in an unforgiving environment with an equally unforgiving medium. I also love the carver network — truly an amazing, supportive circle of incredible artists who are as tight as family.

AW: You're dealing with a tough canvas. What's the most difficult part of the process?

KD: Working in competition temperatures that can reach minus 50 degrees is definitely up there. You're going to get wet. You're going to get cold. The hardest part is learning how to adjust to these conditions and just being prepared physically and mentally for standing outside, working away on your piece for 16 hours.

AW: Is it hard letting go of these ephemeral creations?

KD: Yeah, it melts, and all your work is gone. But you remember it and enjoyed the process, and really that's what matters. In 2008, I went to the World Ice Art Championships in Fairbanks, Alaska,

and after a week of work and taking third place in the Multi-Block Competition with a group of close colleagues and friends, it was hard walking away knowing it was the last time I would see all that hard work in a tangible state. But I have pictures, stories and memories. We create knowing in the end that we'll lose work, but another canvas always awaits.

AW: Is creating a national pro circuit for ice carvers almost as challenging as ice carving itself? What do we need to know about the NICA?

KD: NICA was launched 25 years ago when its founding members left a competition and designed the idea of a national association dedicated to ice carvers on a bus ride home. To date, we're the only such organization in the world, and we're aging very well. The only way to truly become a certified ice carver is through NICA, and we host the most prestigious events in the country — including "Tournament of Champions" competitions like New York's Ithaca Ice Wars and West Virginia's Greenbrier Winterfest.

AW: Is there a Wayne Gretzky of ice carving?

KD: There are many. Steve Brice, Aaron Costic, Greg Butauski, Junichi Nakamura and Glen Motley rank among the biggest names in the ice-carving world, and it's very difficult to put one in front of the other. Brice has won more world championships than anyone. Costic holds the most gold medals and has been the reigning [NICA] Tour Champion for the past five years.

AW: Is ice carving spectator-friendly? What are some of the most exciting ice-carving events to watch?

KD: It's the perfect family-friendly, hot-cocoa-sipping spectator sport — but bring warm clothes. One of our top annual competitions is happening this month in Perrysburg, Ohio, during Winterfest [Feb. 21-23], a great winter fair in the historic downtown area which features music, food, wine tasting and a four-hour, two-block carving competition on Saturday, right along the town's main street. Venturing farther north is the classic NWT Ice Sculpting Championships in Yellowknife, Canada [March 28-30], where thousands of hardy spectators come to watch two-man teams carve giant Chevy Blazer-sized blocks of ice into amazing works of art right out there on [frozen solid] Great Slave Lake.



Go to aa.com/americanway for the statistics that factor into carving a block of ice; search keyword **ice**. Visit www.nica.org to learn more about the National Ice Carving Association.