



## Carving out a hobby

Automotive technician Roger Latondress is handy with a knife as well as a wrench.

**By Rick Cogbill**

A busy automotive shop is a time-pressured, stress-filled environment, and to keep things in perspective many technicians have an after-hours hobby to help bring balance back into their lives.

For automotive technician Roger Latondress of Watson Lake, Yukon, it's wood. He carves it – and he's good at it.

"If there's anything that I really like

plete. The door – depicting a bald eagle grabbing a struggling salmon out of the water – was commissioned by Scott and Linda Goodwin for The Northern Beaver Post Gift Shop, which they operate at Mile 650 on the Alaskan Highway. "The door is becoming a major tourist attraction!" says Scott, and a number of dignitaries were on hand for its unveiling,



**Roger Latondress of Watson Lake, Yukon, is gaining a reputation as a natural artist for his intricate wood carvings.**

doing, it's carving," says Roger. "It allows you to create."

Originally from Port Alberni, Roger has lived and worked in the Yukon since 1994. His customers include locals and tourists alike, and in August 2003, Roger won the Golden Host Award, an honor from the Yukon tourism industry based on visitor nominations of front line staff who provided them with excellent service.

But he's also well-known throughout the North for his wooden creations. One massive project, a 300-lb door carved out of yellow cedar, took four years to com-

including Yukon Premier Dennis Fentie, and the Minister of Tourism and Culture, Elaine Taylor.

The event was also a fundraiser for Josiah Jakesta, a young local boy with leukemia. This kind of community involvement is typical for Roger. He made 'the Storytelling Van' for the local library – a three-foot long truck and trailer unit made of local pine. Its doors have wooden locks, he explains. "If the kids figure out how to unlock a particular door, the book that's in there is read to them that afternoon."

Roger also teaches local school kids how to carve. "You have to really think about where their skill levels are," he says. "The first lesson is you never take your eyes off of what you're doing."

The next rule is to be patient; don't try to take too much wood at a time. Roger picks a simple shape, and carves the same thing as they do, so they can see how it's done. "And most times, if they put in a little effort, they end up with something they're really proud of."

Roger's inspiration for woodcarving came from hearing his mother tell about the wonderful wooden toys his grandfather used to carve for his children at Christmas. "The stories really inspired me to try it, and as a little kid I used to go out there and start whittling wood." At first, he laughs, nothing happened other than wood chips. "But I kept at it and in time I taught myself how to carve."

Roger has made everything from wooden boots to cartoon figures to hand-carved doors, including one for the local NAPA dealer's new home. "He and his wife came up with the concept of having a loon on the door. So I carved a loon landing on the water. It took about 200 hours."

He's been to the Great Northern Arts Festival in Inuvik (an invitation only event) and gets out to shows in Whitehorse whenever he can. "I'd like to get into larger pieces than I do now," he admits.

Throughout his career, Roger has found an interaction between wood-working and mechanics that's been very beneficial. "Without the mechanics I probably wouldn't have a lot of the skills that I've developed with my woodcarving, and visa-versa."

Back when Roger was young, he knew he needed to get into a trade. The problem was he enjoyed both working on cars, and working with wood. "I'd been playing with automobiles since I was 13," he says, "and I loved doing it. But even more so I loved woodworking." So how does one decide which is the hobby, and which is the career?

"I never want to get tired of woodworking," says Roger, "so I decided to save that for my hobby!" 🚗