

Woodwork at Men’s Shed a hoot



David Wakefield, who usually works with steel, turned his hand to wood to create a prototype of the Guardian Owl Project.

Erika Allen

STANDING an imposing 2.7 metres tall, a giant owl made largely from recycled timber is taking shape at the Sale Men’s Shed.

Its creator, Latrobe Valley artist David Wakefield, hopes the striking feathered sculpture will become the blueprint for a much larger community initiative, one that brings together men’s sheds, disability support services, and NDIS participants across Gippsland.

Dubbed the Guardian Owl Project, the concept is designed to be accessible to people of all abilities, with participants able to contribute at whatever level suits them.

“I was looking for something as a project that would be able to cater for all abilities,” Mr Wakefield told the *Gippsland Times*.

“Woodwork is really great because it is accessible. If someone has only got the capacity to sand something, they’re still participating in the project.”

Mr Wakefield brought the project to the Sale Men’s Shed believing this kind of organisation is the ideal place to create connections and share skills.

“I see a project like this having great value for the community, so it was always going to be in a place like a men’s shed,” he said.

“They’re a really great organisation. You can walk into any men’s shed, and they’ll open their door,” he said.

“People are genuinely kind, nice and helpful. There’s something to be said for some positivity, kindness and shining a light on that sort of thing.”

While the owl itself is impressive, Mr Wakefield said the real purpose of the project was creating opportunities for people to connect, build confidence



The idea and creation of the pilot program for the Guardian Owl Project has taken shape in the Sale Men’s Shed over the last month.

and develop new skills. The project has the opportunity to be one of reciprocal benefits, where makers share their skills and knowledge with participants.

“There’s a real thing about sheds,” the artist, who grew up tinkering away in his grandfather’s shed, said.

“Men typically like to have conversations without looking at each other.... get them out on a workbench and working on a project, that’s where I think the real communication starts.

“You develop trust, rapport with each other, and then those conversations might flow organically,” Mr Wakefield said.

“The passing of skills; I’m sure men’s sheds were formed with that in mind because it’s a known thing that blokes like to work that way and to pass on skills to other people is why we’re here.”

Mr Wakefield left an open invitation for anyone in the community to lend a hand. He has already seen participants grow in confidence as the project progressed, from light sanding to operating other tools for more complex components.

“One young guy came down after seeing some posters out. He’s loving it. He’s here at nine o’clock in the morning and doesn’t want to go home.

“That’s the real driver. Just to see that spark in the eye light up.”

The project is currently operating as a pilot program, allowing him to test how the model can be replicated. Made from about 90 per cent recycled pallet timber, the owl has been built through a process of constant problem-solving and experimentation.

When completed, Mr Wakefield hoped the sculpture would eventually be displayed in a public space where it can continue its work long after

construction finishes.

“As an object, I think this will do its real work by being out there in the community,” he said.

“Somewhere like the gardens where people will wonder, ‘What is that?’

“I’ve been a maker and artist all my life, and that’s the power of artwork. It’s a conversation starter.”

That conversation, he hopes, will extend beyond the sculpture itself and shine a light on the contributions of people with disabilities.

“People will see it and wonder where it came from and learn it is a project done by NDIS participants,” he said.

“The reason it’s at scale is because it’s big, bold and it draws attention.”

Ultimately, Mr Wakefield hopes the Guardian Owl Project can be replicated in communities across Gippsland and beyond.

“The gold star would be if I could come into an area, run a project, and have people participating able to do projects after I’m gone,” he said.

“Even if someone just did one thing - a bit of sanding, a feather, a piece of decoration - and then they see it out in the community and say, ‘I worked on that.’

“I think that gives a real sense of ownership.

“I’ve worked with people with disabilities over the years, and they do feel quite disempowered. That’s a real thing.

“So anything that gives people the chance to contribute is a really positive thing.”



Details like the owl's talons require skilled work to replicate their rough texture.



Photos: Erika Allen



Chosen for its unmistakable appearance, Mr Wakefield also said the owl represented wisdom and guardianship as it watches over a community.