

## Collaboration: Salvage Arts Presents Striking Symbols Of Salvation

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Story and Photos by Phil Nero

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It's likely Jesus would be proud to have these crosses symbolize His sacrifice. Ranging in height from two feet to well over 12 feet tall, each was individually designed and created in a spirit of friendship, generosity, companionship, and service. Most were personalized in some way. And every one is a work of art that respects creation because all were fashioned from discarded materials – railroad scrap, primarily old track spikes.

"I am the world's greatest or worst scrounger, depending on how you look at it," says Br. Mike Wilmot, SJ, the artist behind the crosses. Br. Wilmot, however, considers himself a builder first who just happened to learn how to weld many years ago. The artist stuff takes a far back seat to his real passion, building affordable housing for the economically disadvantaged.

Sunlight glistens through the configuration of railroad spikes and other scrap materials Br. Mike Wilmot, SJ created for St. James Catholic Church in Omaha at the request of his friends Dwain and Sheila Pedersen

So when Dwain and Sheila Pedersen decided they wanted to donate a cross in memory of their families to St. James Catholic Church in Omaha, they went directly to their longtime friend, Br. Wilmot.

"We've known Brother all our married lives," says Sheila.

"And then some," adds Dwain, who has walked many a deserted track bed with Br. Wilmot and scouted out old scrap heaps over the years looking for spikes and other discarded railroad hardware.





a wedding gift

Since Jesuits take a vow of poverty, the Pedersens could not pay Br. Wilmot directly to make the cross. Instead they pledged and agreed-upon amount to Gesu Housing, the non-profit agency Br. Wilmot established as part of his efforts to build affordable housing in North Omaha. What has evolved into Gesu Housing over the past several years is responsible for three finished houses and two that are under construction.

So the Pedersens' act of charity for their parish will roll over into the community. And many of the dollars invested in Gesu Housing continue to roll over again and again as the money from the sale of finished houses helps pay for the construction of the next.

The finished cross that now stands high above the ground at St. James Parish weighs in at 1,200 pounds, is 12 feet, 3 inches tall, and took about a year to make. Much more time and many more spikes than the first cross Br. Wilmot made 10 years ago for his friends Dr. Michael Morrison and his wife Michelle.

That one, which fits nicely in the Morrison's living room, was the catalyst for crosses to come.

When Michelle's niece saw that first cross, she asked Br. Wilmot to make one to put in an art shop she owned at the time. Coincidentally, it was spotted there by another longtime friend of Br. Wilmot's, Jean Miller. When she found out who the artist was, she couldn't wait to get it home and invite Br. Wilmot to dinner.

"When I got there, she led me out to the garden to 'show me something she said she wanted me to see.' We both had a good laugh. When she saw it, she had no idea I had made it, and when it sold, I had no idea she was the person who bought it."

Things just took off from there. Br. Wilmot kept creating crosses. Some were gifts for friends; some were sale items for charity auctions; and others he was commissioned to make. His style evolved too as he experimented with ways to heat, bend, and twist the spikes and other scrap pieces.



created for St. James Catholic Church in Omaha



Over time he has grown comfortable with different styles, but not with putting a price tag on the finished items. More often than not, that works out far better anyway. What people wind up paying on their own in the form of a donation to Gesu Housing is often more than he would ever feel comfortable asking.

Over the span of 10 years, Br. Wilmot has kept accurate records and can tell you he has made exactly 24 crosses. He can even estimate the number of spikes he has used. But what this world-class scrounger can't begin to guess is the how many hours he has spent searching for spikes and other materials his body of work comprises.

He simply knows he won't stop anytime soon.

at the Jesuit Middle School in Omaha



Br. Mike Wilmot (left) and Michelle Morrison stand next to the first cross he made 10 years ago for Michelle and her husband Dr. Michael Morrison. The cross includes an IHS symbol (middle) affiliated with the Jesuits (Dr. Morrison attended Creighton University) and (right) a version of the logo for the Society of the Sacred Heart (which runs Duchensne Academy, Michelle's high school alma mater).

Br. Mike Wilmot can be contacted at [mwilmot@jesuitswisprov.org](mailto:mwilmot@jesuitswisprov.org).