

## **Crossroads: Episode 22**

### **The Legacy of Cathedral Carvers with Oscar-Winning Director Marjorie Hunt**

#### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? Our new podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking conversations featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space to discuss politics, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygaard Owens. Today's episode is another behind the scenes look at the stone carvers of the Cathedral. But this time, we're traveling backward in time. We're joined by Marjorie Hunt, folklorist and curator with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. In 1984, she published the Academy Award winning short documentary *The Stone Carvers*, based on the work of the Italian immigrants who built Washington National Cathedral.

Also joining us in this conversation is our Director of Public Affairs, Kevin Eckstrom. Welcome, Marjorie. It is so good to have you here with us today.

#### **Marjorie Hunt**

Thank you, Jo. I've been looking forward to it. It's a pleasure to be here. It feels like home, really.

#### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Oh, good. We've been looking forward to this as well. And we have also with us today, Kevin Eckstrom, the Cathedral's Chief Public Affairs Officer and someone who knows all the many intricacies of Cathedral history. Welcome, Kevin.

#### **Kevin Eckstrom**

Thank you. Although I'd like to clarify that I'm here in my capacity as president of the Marjorie Hunt Fan Club.

#### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Excellent. We'll accept that.

**Marjorie Hunt**

The feeling's mutual.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Marjorie and Kevin are joining our conversation from the Cathedral in D.C., and I am recording from my home in Cleveland, Ohio. So, Marjorie, you have this long connection with the Cathedral. I'm so curious, how did it start and how have you remained connected over the years?

**Marjorie Hunt**

So it started quite a long time ago, actually. Kevin reminded me wonderfully that 2024 is the 40th anniversary of the premiere of *The Stone Carvers* film, but I actually am celebrating my 46th anniversary of meeting the master carvers here at the Cathedral. Vincent Palumbo, Roger Morigi, Frank Sic, and a little later Constantine Seferlis. But I was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania in their Department of Folklore and Folklife, and I just started my first year there, getting my PhD in folklore, and had come home for the summer and was hired by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to do fieldwork for them, field research for a program for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Then it was called the Festival of American Folklife, and the focus was on the occupational traditions and culture of Washington, D.C.

We had a long history of doing programming with working Americans for the big Bicentennial Festival that the Smithsonian presented in 1976. So I was hired to do field work, field research, and I read this article in the Washington Post about these Italian American carvers working at the Cathedral.

And I thought, well, that sounds great. So I literally drove over to the Cathedral, and at that time, I think some of your visitors will know. Kevin, you probably remember.

**Kevin Eckstrom**

Maybe vaguely.

**Marjorie Hunt**

Just like in medieval times, the workshop, the carvers' workshop, was located in the shadow of the Cathedral, right across from what's now the northwest visitor's entrance. And it was this small white wooden building and filled with windows, and I literally pressed my nose against the window and looked in, and there was Vincent Palumbo alone in the shop, carving.

And I was just in awe of this shop. It was filled with so many beautiful things, you know, with models and templates and just seeing him with the stone working away. And he looked up and saw me and motioned me to come in. And so I told him, you know, I'm doing field work for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

And he was very welcoming. But so fortunate that day, Roger Morigi and Frank Sic, longtime carvers for the Cathedral, came to visit Vincent. So this was 1978, and Roger Morigi had been the master carver at the Cathedral for many, many years. He had first started working there in 1956. And Frank Sic was a longtime carver, good friend, and another great carver.

And I came to visit Vincent. And so we introduced ourselves. But pretty soon they just forgot I was there, and they just started talking shop. You know, about tools and stone and great masters and beautiful work. And it was really a transformative moment for me. I realized I was in the presence of very rare individuals, these highly skilled master crafts people.

And it's been a passion project of mine ever since. So that was the beginning. And in the summer of 1978, we invited and brought Vincent Palumbo, Frank Sic, Roger Morigi, and Constantine Seferlis to demonstrate their craft at the Folklife Festival. At that time it was being held in October. So in 1978 and 1979, they demonstrated their craft.

And it was wonderful working with... I was working with Ken Feller, Nancy Fetterman, at that time, I think Kevin, it was Nancy Montgomery, you know, and Cathedral Age was like such an incredible resource. All the carvers were clearly beloved by the Cathedral. And lots of great photographs of the work that had been done before.

So right then and there, I decided I was gonna write my PhD dissertation. So that's feeding into the research. And I'm a folklorist by training. So my research is really based... I'm interested in their stories, their skills and knowledge, their values and traditions. So that was, you know, where the interviewing was going. But they loved working at the Cathedral so much and we can get into that later.

I do have a story about why the film though.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Yes, I would love that. That's one of my questions, so go for it.

## **Marjorie Hunt**

Okay. So I believe it was the fall of 1978, and your master carvers were demonstrating their skills and knowledge at the festival, but we also have another presentation venue there that I just love. It's called it's a small narrative stage, and every hour on the hour, we bring people together and have a moderated discussion. So I was the presenter, the moderator, and it was Vincent Palumbo, Roger Morigi, Frank Sic, and maybe Constantine Seferlis.

And so I was just asking them questions, you know, how did they learn, you know, what brought them to the United States and, and very much about the work they were doing at the Cathedral. And it came time for question and answers. And so someone in the audience raised their hand. And mind you, they just spent 45 minutes getting to know these carvers as people and the work that they had done.

And someone asked the question, have you ever done any other work in Washington besides Washington National Cathedral? And Roger Morigi, then in his 70s, leaned over and pointed over to Constitution Avenue, to the Commerce Building. And he said, see that tympanum there? And it's this gorgeous tympanum over a doorway with a reclining figure. He's like, see that figure there?

In 1932, I carved that, and the entire audience just spontaneously rose to their feet and gave a standing ovation. And I was like, whoa! They had connected a human being, like the craftsman, with the buildings and the beauty that surrounded them. And they had made this connection. And at that moment I thought, okay, this has to reach more than the 30 people that are in this audience.

So the goal was to make a film, tell their stories, tell the story of their work at the Cathedral. And at that point I thought, if I can just get it on PBS, if I can just get it on nationwide PBS. So to raise awareness, because at that time Vincent was working half time, Roger and Frank had retired, and the construction had stopped at the Cathedral.

There was a hiatus while they raised more money so that they could build the West Tower. So Vincent was actually working part time and the Cathedral, and it's really great wisdom, they kept the younger carver on in hopes that when construction and building and carving started again, they would have this continuity, because he had learned from his father who worked at the Cathedral, from Roger Morigi, from this older generation.

So he had that legacy. And the Cathedral kept Vincent with you on staff. And sure enough, he was able to pass on that knowledge when the time came.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Right, to our next generation of stone carvers, some of whom we talked to in our previous episode, we will put that in the show notes if you haven't heard that yet, with our current stone masons and stone carvers. And it's just incredible. And now they are teaching the next generation. But as we learn, there just isn't work like this anymore.

The way that we build and adorn our buildings, it's so very different now than it was in our history.

**Marjorie Hunt**

Yes, that's true. And the Cathedral, I just feel that you've given a great gift to the nation because you, from the very inception and going back to 1907, have valued excellent craftsmanship. And you've gathered these incredibly talented craftspeople, all carvers, stained glass artisans, blacksmiths, I mean, the incredible Samuel Yellen. His work is here. So it was it's like a Mecca for craftspeople in the nation.

And when Vincent first started working here, he immigrated to this country in 1961. His father was working at the Cathedral with Roger Morigi. And Vincent joined the Cathedral and worked here for more than half his lifetime until he passed away in the year 2000, taking over from Roger Morigi. So Vincent became the master carver in 1978 when Roger retired, and then when the work started on the Cathedral again in the early 80s, he was able to train.

There were 10 to 12 young apprentices in the workshop. Again it was a thriving, bustling place. And yes, that is Sean Callahan and your very talented carvers and masons here were young apprentices that I met when they were just... yeah, I mean, 40 years ago.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

And they're going to be featured in the Folklife Festival next summer, is that right?

**Marjorie Hunt**

Yes. I'm so excited. So the overarching theme of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in the summer of 2025 is youth and the future of culture. And as part of that overarching theme, I'm curating a program called Next Generation Artisans. And the traditional building

trades. And so I'm just so excited to feature the Cathedral's craftspeople and incredible work that they've been doing.

The earthquake restoration project here. But what's exciting to me is that you've got this master mason, Joe Alonso, and these incredibly talented master carvers Andy Uhl and Sean Callahan. And now Brianna Castelli, a young 24 year old woman, the first female ever that the Cathedral has hired as a mason. And I know that that Joe and Andy and Sean are so excited to be able to pass on their knowledge to Brianna.

So it's exciting to feature a young person coming up, a young woman coming up in the trade, and to see this intergenerational transmission of skill and knowledge from these skilled craftspeople to Brianna. And I think what's great about what's happening here at the Cathedral is that Brianna served a very rigorous four year apprenticeship with the bricklayer's workers union.

So, you know, she has the skills. But, as she'll say, there aren't people out there doing Gothic style, 14th century Gothic style stone carving. And so she is like every journeyman before her, learning on the job. And she's, you know, the fact that Joe and Andy and Sean can share their knowledge and pass it on to her, and then she'll carry the torch forward.

So it's incredibly exciting to see. And for me, having started here in 1978 and meeting Joe and Andy and Sean in 1985 and '87, and then here we are, I was telling Joe Alonso that 2025 is the 40th anniversary of our meeting.

**Kevin Eckstrom**

We're going to have to have a party.

**Marjorie Hunt**

We have to have a party.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I want to be there for that. So I love this continuity of history and tradition. And the Cathedral certainly has a commitment to that. But we also have this commitment to growth and change, to pulling in what is modern and how we see and understand the world differently now versus at its inception in 1907, when things were being carved and stained glass was created in the 30s, 40s and 50s.

I'm thinking of Resurrection Chapel, where we see Jesus depicted as a dark-skinned man, because we know that Jesus was a dark-skinned man, and the Now and Forever windows. So Kevin, Marjorie talked to us a little bit about this juxtaposition of the continuity of tradition, but then also this commitment to change.

### **Kevin Eckstrom**

So I think one of the great gifts that the Cathedral has to offer is this idea that there is permanence in the world, and the building itself certainly feels and looks very permanent. But yet there's also change. And there's... each generation gets to leave its mark on, you know, in this case, the building. But in a wider sense, each generation gets to leave its mark on faith.

Each generation gets to leave its mark on American history, the American story. And so one of the things I think that's so fascinating about the building trades and the space that Marjorie occupies, is this idea that you have to have a connection with the past, to really be able to actually see where we are right now and hopefully where we're going.

And all of that's done through stonemasons and carvers and stained glass window experts and all of that. And so they all have something to show us. But I think also something to teach us, you know, about where we are at this particular moment in time. You know, just yesterday the committee was examining a new statue, that's going to be going into the Cathedral.

It's a statue of Saint Phoebe, who's the patron saint of deacons, actually. But it was so interesting to be in this space where it looks like it's finished, right? I mean, every square inch of this building is decorated somehow, but yet they found a niche that was empty and here's going to go this new statue about two feet tall.

And to see that process, you know, to literally see people put their mark on a space in real time, was really interesting to see. Now, that was one statue. I mean, you made a whole movie about these guys doing that same thing.

### **Marjorie Hunt**

Oh, Kevin, I mean, what you've just said is so right on the mark, because there is that feeling that they're leaving their mark on something that's permanent. But it's part of this greater project, the Cathedral, which has to do with faith. It's a sacred space. But also, it's so inspiring. Just to humankind because you've celebrated human artistry and striving for perfection and excellence.

And I think that people see that when they see the mark of these craftspeople. And I know that the class people feel it. I have heard, speaking of leaving your mark, every glass person that I've ever interviewed who's worked here said we love working at the Cathedral because they value excellence, and they give us time to do our best work.

And that is not true out there in the world of building in many, many places. And certainly people who come here are inspired, I think, by the beauty of what's created. But going back to like leaving your mark on the time, I mean, Constantine Seferlis was known as a carver who had a great imagination and ability to sort of design and create his own work.

And during the 60s, in that time of turmoil that we were having back then, he carved a gargoyle that was a depiction of a hippie, and he said, I felt this is something that was going on at that time, and I thought it would be fitting. And it's up there on the Cathedral. And I think that's another thing that the carvers valued was that, you know, this is the Gothic Cathedral.

And they he did this sort of Gothic tradition of that kind of creativity that could go on. And so there's stories all over the Cathedral.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Isn't there a story about you? I hear that you are depicted.

### **Kevin Eckstrom**

Yes. Marjorie's being very humble. She hasn't talked about her own angel statue yet. Would you like would you like to tell our listeners how your face is literally carved onto the building?

### **Marjorie Hunt**

Oh, gosh. Well, I could not believe this, but the documentary film about the stone carvers, which, as I said, our goal was if we could just get on PBS and we could raise awareness about these great carvers and this work that they're doing at the Cathedral so that young people would want to learn and there could be more work.

It went on to win an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short in 1985, and Vincent and the carvers, they were so excited about that. At that time, the work had started on the West Towers, and they were ringing the West Towers with angels playing instruments. That was right, when the iconography that had been chosen. So all these angels had different instruments.



And Vincent went to the clerk of the works, the building committee. Anyway, he did run it up the right channels and said, I'd love to carve an angel that's Marjorie holding the Oscar. And so he got permission to do that. And Jake Carpenter, the sculptor at the time, they asked me for a photo of myself.

And so that is actually just one of the most treasured moments of my life. And to be up there, and I just I can't tell you how much I love and respect these carvers and the Cathedral. And so to me, it's like one of the greatest things that's ever happened to me.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I just remember in watching the documentary, the stone carvers talk about how they are a family, and it sounds like they pulled you into their family and made you a part of it.

### **Marjorie Hunt**

Oh, I'm so incredibly grateful for that, for being part of the family. And they were a family. The workshop was a community. It was a place. It was very much, and they talk about it in these terms, were working life for one, and they felt so appreciated. I know the dean of the Cathedral would come by and visit them and see their work.

And there was just this feeling that what they were doing was so valued.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Much of my work at the Cathedral, as the pastor for Digital Ministry, is to take this physical institution and turn it into a way that people can connect all over the world. And I work with Sonia, our Director of Digital Engagement, and so many other talented people at the Cathedral to make this happen. We have this gorgeous building, and whether you're seeing it in the documentary, whether you're seeing it in YouTube playlists, or our brand new model that we have on the website, that is just stunning.

What seems to happen is these digital outlets draw us in and make us want to come to the physical building even more. It's this beautiful paradox that the symbolism, the beauty of what is there, just draws you in no matter where you are. And there really is something incredible about being in person and just standing in awe of all of the artistry that is present at the Cathedral and the hundreds of thousands of hours that it has taken to make it come to life.

If you could choose something to bring to our digital congregate and our listeners, those who engage with the Cathedral, what would you bring to life for them?

### **Marjorie Hunt**

Oh gosh, let me think on that.

### **Kevin Eckstrom**

So I think what are the most fascinating things about the Cathedral is, yes, Marjorie said everything goes through committee right there. And there are very few accidents in this building. Everything's very intentional, very planned out, and everything has a scheme behind it, you know, whether you realize it or not. But there is also this amazing amount of whimsy in the building, and a lot of that was the result of these stone carvers that Marjorie spent so much time with.

But, you know, they kind of had a free hand in some things. And they would come up with goofy gargoyles, and they've got Darth Vader on the building and all sorts of things. But you find a penguin that has a smile or, you know, up on the towers, there's these grotesques, which are basically gargoyles but without water pipes, but they're all in pairs.

And so my favorite carving in the entire building is this set of teeth that are trying to eat the building. And there's nothing significant about that, other than somebody thought it would be a good idea. And it was kind of fun, right? So that's the thing that I think that I wish more people could experience, whether online or in-person, is the crazy amount of fun that the carvers had at this place.

And to be able to, you know, it's a very serious building, right? We're very formal, we're very official, and we do things very properly. But yeah, we've got a carving of a monkey riding a rocket, you know, like, why? But why not, right? I mean, that's sort of the question.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

And God is a playful god. This is not out of line with our theology.

### **Kevin Eckstrom**

Right.

### **Marjorie Hunt**

Just to build on what Kevin said, because that's so right, you know, I would love to see the whimsy in play, brought to life. I was just thinking, as I was waiting to come in and speak with you all, I was standing in the cloister, and I was just looking at that wonderful little carving of a cat being poked by two birds.

And I just started to laugh and smile. It's just this whimsy, just a little moment. But there are grotesques and gargoyles of many of the carvers up there. They memorialized each other. On top of Vincent's cap is an etched carving of the time that his pickup truck caught the flagpole at the Cathedral, the rope for the flagpole and pulled it over, so that carver captured that, and no one would know it.

But it's up there, and they tell that story. They were just having fun. And also the other side of that whimsy is also this deep feeling that they had, that what they were doing was going to last. So I think it's the permanence of the building and that it does incorporate all this change, you know, the Now and Forever Windows and different parts of American history as we go forward, but they're working on something that's physical, that will last, and that people can come and appreciate. And they've left their mark.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

That makes me think we as human beings, we are people who tell stories, who live stories and connect through stories as people of faith, we have the stories of our faith found in the Bible and in all of those in our tradition. And the Cathedral tells so many of these stories, the stories of our faith, the story of our nation.

And if you know where to look, the story of the carvers and some amazing events that happened during the construction of the Cathedral. It's just incredible how that all comes together. So Marjorie, you are a folklife curator and education specialist with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and this comes out yearly in the Folklife Festivals. What are some of the other ways that you seek to preserve our American folklife tradition and continue it for years to come? And how does that intersect with the Cathedral and our stonemasons and all that they have to offer?

### **Marjorie Hunt**

What I love about the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which has been going on every year since 1967, so more than half a century now, is that it provides a platform on our sacred space of the nation, the National Mall, for people who are part of communities to come and tell their own stories and what they care about and what they value and the traditions they hold dear.

And so it's an opportunity for us to be able to present members of many different communities, whether it's occupational community or ethnic community or the different cultural community, not only in the United States but around the world. But the most

powerful thing I think about the festival is that you're able to meet and hear people, and they can speak for themselves and tell their own stories.

So it is very much about storytelling and providing this space where people can be heard, their voices can be heard and their stories told. And so I'm just so excited that the Cathedral crafts people will be taking part in the summer of 2025. The festival will be from July 2nd through July 7<sup>th</sup>, over the 4th of July holiday, and can tell their stories.

And really, I think the work that they've been doing to restore the stonework on this beautiful Cathedral now, what is it, 13 years since the earthquake? It's an amazing story, and it's a story of skill and knowledge and dedication and love for a place. So I'm excited for people to meet them, and also to learn about the Cathedral and the beautiful work that they're doing there.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Kevin, you do such an amazing job of telling the stories of the Cathedral, whether that is in Cathedral Age or on our blog. There are so many different ways that we have to share the story of the Cathedral, the macro story of what's happening, and then those micro stories of all these individual people and situations and events that happen.

How do you see telling these stories fitting into the ethos of the Cathedral?

### **Kevin Eckstrom**

So the thing that I always, whenever I'm giving a tour, I always start by saying that the Cathedral tells two stories at the same time. One is our story of faith. You know, we are a church after all. And the other is our story, the American story, and our walk together as the American people.

And the places where I think we do that best are when the two stories overlap, when we're telling both stories at once. But I think particularly at this moment in our nation's life, where everything feels so upside down and so pulled apart and so divisive and angry, but it does make you think about, okay, here's where we are right now. Where do we want to go? Where do we want to go as a people?

Who do we want to be? And I think at the end of the day, what story do we want to tell? What started, we want to tell about ourselves. And I think a huge part of doing that is understanding where you've been, where you've come from. And that's part of what I love

about this building, is it tells us who we have been, who we thought was important at certain points in time, and what we lifted up as ideals.

And so I think, you know, part of the beauty of this place is not just the physical beauty, but it's also that power of storytelling and to make us think about who we have been, but also who we want to be.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Thank you.

**Marjorie Hunt**

Oh my gosh. I am president of the Kevin Eckstrom Fan Club because the stories in Cathedral Age... I love how you drill down to so many human stories of individuals. So for example, reading about Dieter Goldkuhle and his beginnings, and then how his son Andrew Goldkuhle comes now making windows here. I love that story.

So I think also on just a very individual and human level, Kevin, you do such a beautiful job of bringing those things to life, as well as I just love how you articulate what the Cathedral is all about in terms of that bigger story and inspiring us to draw from the past or learn from the past. We're connected to the past, but what can we aspire to in the future?

**Kevin Eckstrom**

Aw shucks.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

I think you just gave us our word of hope right there. Thank you, Marjorie, and thank you, Kevin, both for being here today, for sharing your stories of the Cathedral and the stone masons and how it all ties together. I am just in awe of how this magnificent edifice is so rooted in history and tradition, but yet gives us still room to grow and change and continue telling this story of our nation and its people.

**Kevin Eckstrom**

Amen.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Thank you both so much.

**Marjorie Hunt**

Thank you.

**Kevin Eckstrom**

Thank you.

**The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Recording and preserving the heritage of traditional craftwork is an important part of honoring the work of skilled men and women that have given their time and skill to build up our nation. I'm thankful for the work of Marjorie and others at the Smithsonian who do this work. You can see current Cathedral carvers at this summer's Folklife Festival on the National Mall, and you can find a link for the festival in the show notes.

For our next episode, we will feature an excerpt of the upcoming conversation between our dean, Randy Hollerith, and columnist David Brooks. They will discuss Brooks' latest book, *How to Know a Person*, which delves into the art of human connection, exploring the intricacies of empathy, understanding, and the profound impact our relationships have on our lives. Thank you for listening to Crossroads. Until next time, peace be with you.

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