

**Public Art, Compassion, and the Evolution of El Faro Salute!**

by JBONE (the artist formerly known as Jay Sawyer)

My life and livelihood as a metal sculptor stems from a rare transition following a career in the US Merchant Marine after graduating from Maine Maritime Academy. Three very special mentors, each with a degree in sculpture, offered encouragement at a perfect time in my life. They spoke of my raw talents being a gift, and that with devotion I could become “one hell of a sculptor”.

This leap was marked with a solo show at the Arts In The Barn Series in Cushing, Maine in 2007. Of 34 sculptures displayed, 16 sold during the three day viewing. That success elevated my optimism and with no formal art education I committed to exploring the Maine art world and precisely where I best fit in it.

A host of solo and group exhibits around the state, along with representation in well-known galleries, brought on a growing reputation as a Maine artist. In those days, few events garnered as much attention as a First Friday Art Walk in Portland. I participated by rolling a 55” or maybe even a 76” diameter sphere along the sidewalks and streets during the celebration. The performance of “walking my art” set the stage for a magical atmosphere and some of the best conversation and lively interaction with art fans imaginable. Positive reaction from such a wide variety of onlookers led to increasing interest in having my work seen by large numbers of people.

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My entry into the sphere of public art began with *Sunrise At Woolen Mill Park* in my hometown of Warren, in 2010. Created with salvaged material from the demolition of The Georges River Woolen Mill, the tribute was installed at the same property along the St George River which is now Woolen Mill Park, a new public space in our town.

In 2012, my very first horseshoe sphere, *Endless Trot*, was welcomed into the permanent collection at the Owls Head Transportation Museum. The sphere comprised my entire collection of used horse shoes and any knowledgeable equestrian or farrier could go on for hours speaking of the different qualities that the various shoes represented.

In 2013, *Ridin’ the Rails to Rockland* was installed along the Rockland Harbor Trail next to a spur of rail road track, that, to this day serves industry in the city. A stones throw away is an asphalt pad where passenger trains used to bring riders to disembark. The sculpture symbolizes the evolution of Rockland’s reputation as a gritty, hard-working maritime community to that of a cultural destination. I sensed that Rockland and I were on parallel tracks! The title celebrates the resurgence of passenger trains bringing tourists to Rockland and all of its cultural offerings at that time. Since that installation Rockland has come to be known as, arguably, the Arts Capital of Maine.

In 2014, *A Spirit of Its Own* was installed along Jetport Boulevard at the Portland International Jetport. Potentially, millions of people view this sculpture annually, since it can also be seen from the tarmac. This installation afforded me the privilege of creating a prominent and long-lasting tribute to one of my mentors, David A. McLaughlin. The supply of shear rings from which the memorial was created had been salvaged during the demolition of Hangar #2 at the Brunswick Naval Air Station and later bequeathed to me by David. The spirit of these rings carried strong influence throughout the jury process of the Portland Public Art Committee for installation at this exact location.

The multiple benefits that public art can provide a community are well documented. Symbolizing community value can provide remembrance and heighten awareness. Successful public art often transforms a space to a place and leads to a desire of people to meet there socially. Beyond being seen, it can be experienced and promote a higher order of thinking. Prominent displays bring art and its benefits closer to life and, if successful, promote a love of place.

Public art can provide benefits for the artist, as well. Exposure to a growing audience can improve the career of the artist. Several commissions at Studio JBONE have been a direct result of somebody viewing these public works in person or online. However, the installation of *A Spirit of Its Own* demonstrated benefits beyond that. What I saw as a tribute and a vehicle for me to work through my own grief after the loss of my dear friend, David, turned out to be so much more. I witnessed how this installation actually helped other people who were suffering the same loss.

The entire creative process has opened me up spiritually and put me in the path of several awakening experiences. The experience has brought on a better understanding of who I am and my role in the world. Believing in the power of the collective Universe and learning to stay out of my own way has served me well. I'm going to go out on a limb here and suggest that few things can add to the spiritual growth of a person than the ability to create a conduit for compassion.

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October 1, 2015, it was reported that contact had been lost with the 790 foot-long container ship *El Faro*. While en route from Jacksonville, Florida to San Juan, Puerto Rico, the container ship encountered Category 4 Hurricane Joaquin off the coast of the Bahamas. In the early days of the search this community and others up and down the East coast held on to the hopes of locating survivors. Vigils were held from Maine to Florida and Puerto Rico to aid the loved ones of the crew in their distress.

Of the 33 souls on board, five were graduates of Maine Maritime Academy. Four of those five lived in Maine. Michael Holland lived in Wilton and Michael Davidson lived in Windham. Two of the *El Faro* crew, Danielle Randolph and Dylan Meklin, hailed right from Rockland, a few miles from my home. As details of the ships voyage and information about crew members began to be reported, some were harder to process than others.

On October 5th I was being interviewed by a local news anchor here at my creative environment, known today as Studio JBONE. Early in the interview there was mention of my past career in the US Merchant Marine and being a graduate of Maine Maritime Academy. Her focus instantly turned to the story of the *El Faro* and a barrage of questions regarding my thoughts on the tragedy. My response was immediate, "No comment.". Like so many others, I was holding out hope for good news. Furthermore, any attempt to speak of the tragedy put me in a dark place. The reaction of the reporter triggered discomfort and added to my empathy toward the families of the crew.

Eventually the search was called off and efforts switched to recovery. The reality of the situation started to take its grip. As an engineer, the thought of working hard in the engine room to not be defeated by any storm was very unsettling. Recollections of storms that I had fearfully encountered in my own sea-going days rose to the surface. Contact with many in my Maine Maritime Academy family seemed to always include mention of the extent of horror that the crew endured in those last few hours and minutes.

Over time, I learned that Dylan Meklin of Rockland was the youngest officer of the crew. Dylan had just joined the *El Faro* in Jacksonville marking his first employment as a maritime officer after his recent MMA graduation. Memories of this same milestone taking place for me on the Exxon Baltimore in 1985 appeared. Crossing the bridge from being a student with dreams to accepting the heavy responsibilities of being in charge of a 19,000 horsepower engine room for eight hours a day is a significant life experience.

The act of hanging your USCG license in "the Rack" for the first time indicates personal growth on a scale that would seem to warrant a celebration. Typically, this celebration is by yourself and takes place in your mind, as the entire crew, which you are now a part of, is hard at work with routine and responsibilities. The range of emotions that Dylan experienced shortly after joining the ship on the afternoon of Tuesday, September 29th up to the early hours of Thursday, October 1st are unimaginable. Knowing that Dylan was the same age as my own son added another dimension of consideration that was just as difficult to process. A sense that each crew member had their own chilling anecdote offered an understanding of the magnitude of the grief that the global maritime community, and those connected to it, were experiencing.

The sinking of the *El Faro* and loss of her entire crew came to be the worst maritime casualty in decades. As retrieval of the Voice Data Recorder played out and the investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board began, an increasing amount of inquiries regarding an *El Faro* memorial arrived at my studio. My achievements in public art and unique perspective toward this tragedy was on the minds of many caring people.

In early 2017, I received an email from the esteemed Bob Keyes, Arts Writer for the Portland Press Herald. He had been contacted by the American Maritime Overseas organization. AMO is the union that all officers on board the *El Faro* were members of. A representative was seeking Bob's input regarding their search for a sculptor to create a long-lasting memorial for their training facility in Florida. Bob informed me that he had confidently supplied the gentleman with my name. I then informed Bob that time in my studio had already been devoted toward a concept for a suitable memorial here in Maine.

The AMO rep and I set a time to discuss this matter. On the day we were set to communicate I received an email with news that their selection committee had decided on a sculptor from Texas. I never slowed a bit in thinking that this news was a defeat regarding my vision, if anything it was just the opposite. This occurrence demonstrated that there was indeed a need to memorialize the crew, timing was right, and at the same time cemented the notion that I was the right person for this role.

That summer, Studio JBONE exhibited at the Maine Boats Homes & Harbors Show in Rockland. I took along working sketches of potential concepts in search of feedback. The well attended show provided a perfect audience and the amount of compassion just below the surface in this community truly blew me away. So many stories were shared confirming the solid character of Dylan and Danielle. I came away from the three day show in awe of the love and appreciation in this community for the two mariners and the lives they lived. It could be said that because of Hurricane Joaquin, a huge wave of emotion rolled over our region. There is no doubt this same love was evident in the communities of each of the *El Faro* crew.

While at that same show, I crossed paths with a business man from Thomaston for whom I had performed structural welding at his business in the past. He is a fan of my art and an existing client. We spent some time talking of the disastrous sinking and the blooming vision for a symbol of the community compassion we had just experienced over the weekend. He was enthusiastic and later in the year, after about an hour-long presentation at his office, he wrote a generous check in support of the vision. This was a milestone for the project and the point at which I was convinced that *El Faro Salute!* was actually underway.

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The influence of my time in the US Merchant Marine, experience as a certified scuba diver, and an upbringing on the Maine coast coalesced to reveal a concept for a universal Lost At Sea memorial of considerable scope. A decision was made to focus on *El Faro Salute!*. This portion of the comprehensive concept could serve as a stand-alone memorial and its successful installation could inspire collaborative community support for the inclusive composition to follow.

It seemed appropriate to contact surviving family members to inform them of my vision and get their honest reaction. This action required me to go deep within. Deeper than ever before. Every effort was made to be respectful of their privacy and emotions and over time families of all four crew members that resided in Maine visited Studio JBONE. Our conversations revealed so much on many fronts and in many directions. A common thread in talking with these four families and others living outside of Maine, beyond the enormous love, was the pride for the accomplishments by each crew member toward meeting their personal goals. I do believe that my effort was interpreted as heartfelt and each family expressed gratitude to learn that their loved ones would be memorialized. Their sense of relief was strong enough for me to know that it was now time to really get to work.

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Experience accumulated from the previous public art projects would serve me well in seeing this vision through. With a need for fundraising, the process would be more formal. A professional Development Consultant, who also happened to be a fan of my art, was tipped off about my vision for *El Faro Salute!*. She generously contributed expertise in tailoring a development plan for this distinct approach.

The Penobscot Marine Museum was approached to serve as fiscal sponsor and elected to do so. This organization is dedicated to preserving the history of Penobscot Bay and all things associated with it.

Dragon Products owns a beautiful plot of land on the banks of Rockland Harbor. It is near the terminal where cement is shipped by barge to points south, which places it exactly at the intersection of culture and industry. I have fantasized often about the potential this property has for a bold statement. It seemed like a perfect spot to showcase a Lost At Sea memorial in the midst of the community so rich with maritime heritage.

Dragon Products had supported the installation of *Ridin' the Rails to Rockland* on city land back in 2013, and contributed to its installation. With Dragon being the largest commercial user of the rail road in this region, that collaboration was a nice fit. I contacted Dragon with hopes to share my vision of *El Faro Salute!* and was invited to meet with upper management. Soon after, Dragon and the City of Rockland expressed their support for this effort. The prominent location, with all the activity of Rockland Harbor and its landmark breakwater, was perfect. Especially since "el faro" is Spanish for lighthouse.

Once I could share official news of securing an appropriate fiscal sponsor and the perfect property providing easy access to *El Faro Salute!*, an anonymous donation of \$25,000 was received at the museum. This development of establishing a "major sponsor" meant that the project had now met all the criteria for a successful fundraising campaign. In late June the fundraising campaign was launched and to date over one third of the budget has been raised.

From early in the process I have hoped to make the Maine Maritime Academy family aware of this opportunity to bond and express our collective compassion. Not long ago I was contacted by the editor of *Mariner* magazine with an invitation to be interviewed for inclusion in the upcoming publication. This magazine for the MMA Alumni family is delivered around the globe and reaches a very accomplished audience. I have the privilege of an Alumni Profile in the spiffy magazine and there will be mention *El Faro Salute!* with directions to the memorial website. This is a wonderful development.

Since I am a sculptor, and not a writer; and because the desired message to this particular audience is so important, it has been a long affair to craft a letter that will await my MMA family at [ElFaroSalute.com](http://ElFaroSalute.com). In the days of getting this essay polished up I was intently focused on my message and becoming increasingly aware of the influence that my education at Maine Maritime Academy has had on my life and how engrained it is in this memorial. Well, I'll be a son-of-a-gun, but in the middle of this concentrated effort, an email arrived from a gentleman in South Carolina. It seemed that he had purchased a Maine Maritime Academy class ring on Ebay several years ago with the hopes of some day finding its rightful owner.

What are the odds that my ring which had been missing for over eight years would find its way home at this precise time? It actually arrived in my mailbox within minutes of sending out the digital files to my website manager. I can't help but think of the gears of the Universe grinding away to make this happen. I will not question any of it and bathe in the comfort of being on the right path.

I hope you get some understanding of the power of art from this account. Art has the power to be a magnificent conduit for compassion. Creativity has the power to transcend our perceived realities. The collective Universe has the power to manifest. I am a believer. Are you?