

# In conversation:

## "He became the bridge"

LaTiesha Fazakas, Alan Hunt, Cole Speck, & Colin Browne

*I first met Beau Dick on the ferry to Alert Bay several years ago. On that crossing he told me a story. We saw each other regularly in Vancouver after he became Artist-in-Residence at UBC. He was active in the contemporary art community, attending events in the city, often participating, and on the joyful night on which he received his VIVA Award in 2012 for "outstanding achievement and commitment," he took over the ceremony, bringing his fellow honourees onto the stage to celebrate with his family and his community—to everyone's delight. I still half expect to see him at openings. He remembered people and cared for them. Since his unexpected death in 2017, his presence has been sorely missed.*

—Colin Browne

*This interview with LaTiesha Fazakas was conducted at Fazakas Gallery in Vancouver, BC, on September 11, 2019.*

**Colin Browne:** LaTiesha, can you describe your first encounter with Beau?

**LaTiesha Fazakas:** I actually met one of his masks first, and I was so taken aback that I knew I wanted to meet the maker. I was working in another gallery at the time, and I'd opened the doors of a closet that had probably sixty masks in it. When I saw Beau's mask, I was instantly drawn to it. I picked it up and said, "Who made this?" My colleague said, "Oh, that's Beau Dick. He's quite the character." So, about two weeks later, Beau

came into the gallery, and he did not disappoint. He was warm and engaging, and just the right amount of quirky. His clothes were tattered and full of paint; he had a long, scraggly beard, long hair, and a hat with all sorts of crazy things tucked into it. I think it actually had a little wolf sculpture on the front, sticking out. It felt like we just kind of connected in a really meaningful way.

Each time he came in with a mask, he'd spend time telling me the story behind it. Even if he didn't sell the mask because it was too far out for that gallery, we'd spend time talking. I thought, you know, here's someone who's taking chances and really understands where all of these things come from and is putting his own signature on the work. I felt that he really honoured where he came from and yet had his own voice; it was as if he was living his culture day-to-day in his contemporary existence. I continued to see more and more of that over the years as we got to know each other.

**CB:** Then you opened your own gallery?

**LF:** I did, and Beau was a big part of that decision. By that time, I'd known him for eleven or twelve years, and we'd always talked about how it was a shame that he often had to walk away without finding

a market for his more inventive pieces. I started to learn from him about other things as well—the complicated histories along the coast of British Columbia that went unrecorded, residential schools, broken promises, and how he felt about his place in that history. This helped me understand more deeply the artists that I worked with and their pieces. I felt there was an opportunity to say so much more about these works than the common glib retail sales pitch: “Here’s a great piece. It’s got a nifty cultural story”—likely changed for outsider consumption—“and here’s the price. Buy it to remind you of your visit to Canada,” and so on. I thought there could be more engagement with Northwest Coast art, in particular in the context of contemporary art and the contemporary moment. In many respects, Beau was the main inspiration for what I am now doing in my gallery.

**CB:** Can you tell me how the exhibition *Beau Dick / Early Works* came about?

**LF:** A year and a bit after Beau passed, a lady from Ontario contacted me and said, “I have this collection.” She used to work at the Museum of Vancouver gift shop and a couple of others back in the 1970s. She said, “I had to get a different job because I spent most of my money on Beau Dick pieces. And now,” she

said, “my children don’t want the collection. I’d like to sell it to help pay for my retirement.”

The beauty of the pieces that ended up in *Early Works* is that they represent, collectively, every aspect of what Beau could do — what he was interested in at the time — and they’re a great reflection of the period in which they were made. They’re small and really quite intricate. He was selling to gift shops back then, and most gift shops wanted small things because they were easy for travelers to take home with them. However, there were also a couple of big pieces, which I thought made for an interesting contrast. The woman had acquired the collection after the shop she had been working at turned them down. She felt an energy embodied in them, and couldn’t help but purchase them and bring them home. They became her treasures for over forty years. Then, as if the spirit was telling her what to do and when to do it, she decided, “You know what? I think it’s time for these to move on to their next place, to continue their journey somewhere else.” And they came to me, and I gained a beautiful opportunity to put them all together and create this exhibition — this time capsule. Beau always put spirit into his work, and with this group it is particularly apparent. I felt the spirit of each of the masks, especially when they were all together. I hope

this can be translated through a series of photographs.

**CB:** How old was Beau when he carved and painted these masks?

**LF:** They were made between 1978 and 1980, so he was between twenty-three and twenty-five. You can see how curious he was. Some of the masks are emblematic of a strict traditionalist style; he was at the point in his career when you’re supposed to be following the rules until you’ve mastered them. But you can see in these works that he’d mastered the rules enough to be able to test the boundaries. There are some pieces that are clearly Haida design. There are others in the Bella Coola style. Then there’s a Tlingit wolf. There’s a classic Bookwus, and then there’s another striking Bookwus in the collection that is an early example of his expressionistic bent. This may be the earliest piece in which we can see what he’s going to focus on in the future. He’s not going to be doing small, intricate ravens; he’s not going to be doing intricate box designs and carving little things. He’s going to go big, and it’s going to be expressionist. Already, in his twenties, he was looking forward to what would become his style later on and toward the end of his life.

**CB:** Who were his teachers at the time?

**LF:** He apprenticed under his father, his grandfather, and Doug

Cranmer, and then worked with John Livingston and Bill Reid. I think he was a pretty fast learner. It was his calling. He wanted to make things. He wanted to draw, and he wanted to paint, and he wanted to carve. By the time these masks were made he didn't need to be an apprentice. He probably still picked up different tricks from others because that's what everybody does, but he definitely was on his own by this point. He was so prolific. It was really only a two-year, three-year period, and this woman managed to get fourteen pieces, and she was one buyer.

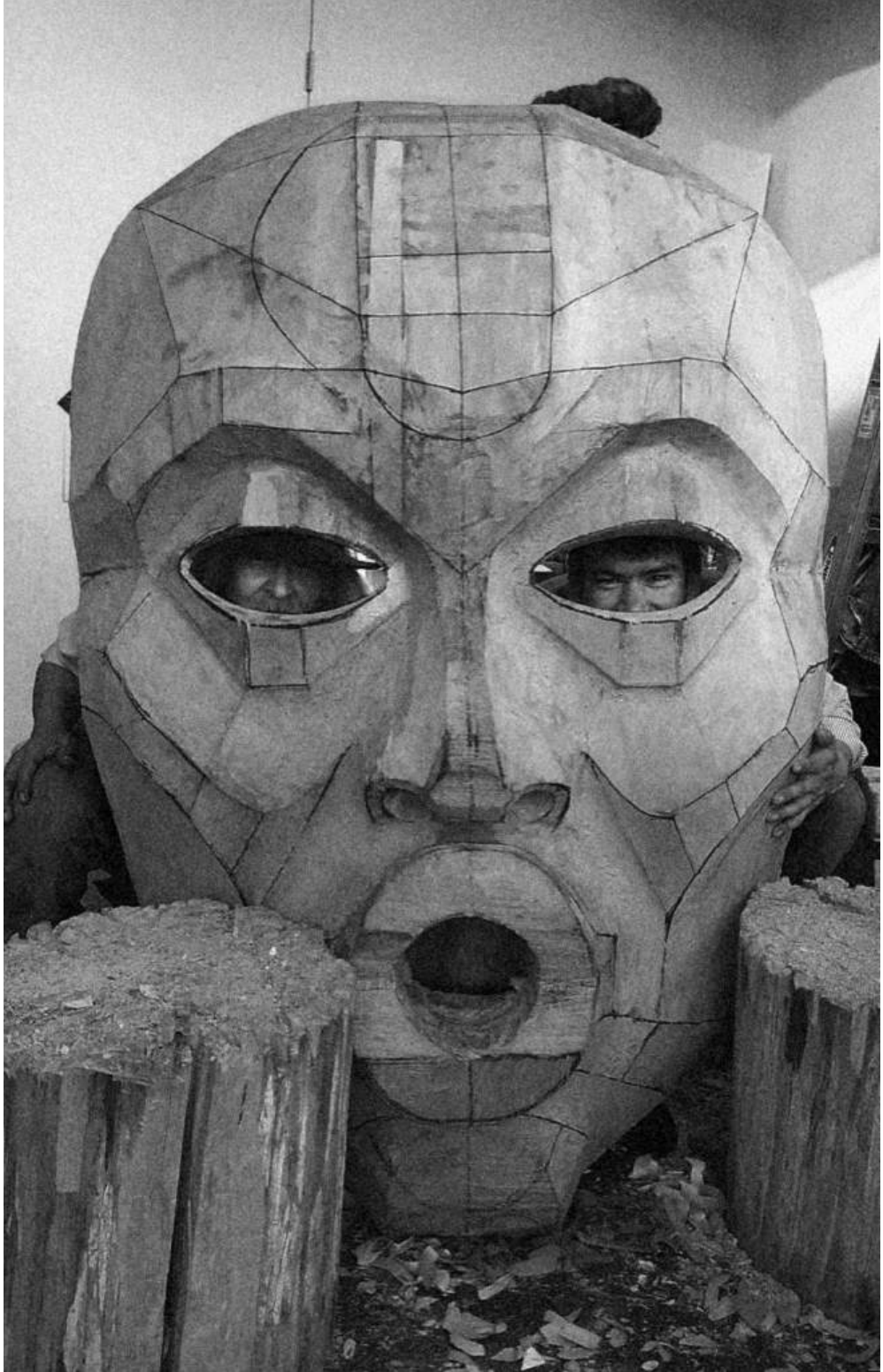
There is a huge lack of knowledge about Northwest Coast art, especially about someone like Beau. He was an outsider. He didn't fit in to anybody's mold. He was more of a rebel. He didn't work with institutions to curate an exhibition or anything like that until his residency at UBC in 2013. I think, too, he was always restless. He didn't have the patience for that life. He wasn't going to create a whole bunch of pieces and sit on them and then put them in an institutional show. He was living mask to mask, and if the mask bought him whatever he needed at that moment, then he was happy.

Before I got into the game, a bunch of galleries were necessary in order to keep an artist afloat. Here in Vancouver, that's just how the system

worked. Beau would take a work to one gallery, and if they didn't buy it, he'd take it to another. It was very much a retail exchange, but both of us knew that things were changing, shifting. I think he started to enjoy the opportunity to have institutional exhibitions, though he never wanted to be the centre of attention just for his own sake. He wanted to make sure that these opportunities were not just about him. He wanted to have family and friends there—to celebrate, and to lift them up. And to add voices from his culture to the conversation.

**CB:** Some people see a separation between what they think of as contemporary Indigenous art and what they regard as traditionally-based art by contemporary Indigenous artists. Was that a question for Beau?

**LF:** I'm not sure Beau really thought about it in those terms. He was more concerned with the function his work could have to make change in the world and uplift his community. If the Contemporary Art world was an avenue for that, then he would utilize it gladly. As for Art, I think it wasn't until quite recently, perhaps when he started at UBC as Artist-in-Residence, that work like his became part of the conversation. There were a number of non-Indigenous contemporary artists who knew Beau and who



Beau Dick and Alan Hunt peeking through Tsonoqua's [Dzunuk'wa's] eyes.

respected his work enough to see the value of it within the lexicon. They understand him as a contemporary innovator. I think of Roy Arden, Neil Campbell, and Jeff Wall, for example. While they considered him a contemporary artist, they also recognized that he came from a different artistic history and cultural background. For years, scholars and collectors believed that what they saw as “traditional” Northwest Coast Indigenous art had no place in the dialogues around contemporary art. It wasn’t until Beau began working at UBC that we really saw the change in how his work was being perceived. He became the bridge, creating a precedent for other artists to enter the discussions about the nature of the contemporary. I think it’s important for traditionally-based works made by contemporary artists to be placed alongside the work of their contemporary peers—to place them in conversation without having to compromise their history or legitimize their participation.

Gallery owner Monte Clark has some Beau Dick pieces in his collection, and one day realized that there was no need to segregate Beau’s work from the contemporary. People now see Beau’s work as contemporary art, as his response to the present from within the continuum of Northwest Coast art history. I hope to see the continued, more complex examination of

Northwest Coast art, one that cautions against a fetishization of the work according to antiquated ideas about culture and ceremony. When we broaden definitions, we provide an opportunity for differences to be celebrated rather than siloed in a way that potentially diminishes their importance. Although based in ceremony and cultural practices, Northwest Coast art continues to be alive and to shape perceptions and definitions of itself. Back in the early 2000s, and probably up until 2012, people would tell me, “The ‘traditional’ work doesn’t belong within the contemporary. It doesn’t have the same social commentary.” I was like, “Whoa. There is so much social commentary here. You have no idea!”

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Beau Dick and Alan Hunt carving Tsonoqua [Dzunuk'wa] at Beau's UBC studio in 2016.

*This interview with Alan Hunt was conducted at Fazakas Gallery in Vancouver, BC, on September 23, 2019.*

**Colin Browne:** Alan, how did you first meet Beau Dick?

**Alan Hunt:** It was almost by accident. I had a mask that needed a little bit of finishing—adding the cedar bark and stuff like that. So I went down to Vancouver. By this time, I'd already crossed paths with Beau in an artist capacity a few times. Somebody said, "Oh, Beau's got a studio out at UBC. Go do your cedar bark out there." I

didn't know where I was going to sell that mask either, and he made a phone call for me and set up the meeting. I mean, I still had to make the deal, but after that, I never really had a chance to leave. Beau said, "Hey, man. There's stuff to do. Come back."

It turned into this really beautiful thing. I was pretty much living with him and Cole [Speck] and we spent a lot of time squatting in the studio. It

was worse than being a logger because I'd come down to Vancouver for six weeks and go home for two weeks, and back down here for a month and then home for three weeks. Beau kept us busy. I'd almost say that I wasn't aware that I was apprenticing because his method of teaching was just very demonstrative and organic. It didn't feel like class was in session, you know. He'd say, "Hey, come look at this. This is how you do this." As he did with everybody, he opened my mind. I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I find myself looking at a piece of wood and trying to visualize something three-dimensionally. But sometimes you just have to start hacking away, and it starts to take shape.

**CB:** I'm curious to know what you began working on after Beau asked you to join him at UBC.

**AH:** Well, he had gotten to a point where he was up to his nose in orders. So, me and Cole were his arms. We were extra arms, and we helped him make a ton of stuff. When the time came for me to host my first Potlatch, we spent many months making what would eventually be known as "Big Beula," his largest Tsonoqua mask, and that financed my Potlatch. He was generous in that way. Don't get me wrong, it was a ton of work, but he didn't have to cut me in on that huge deal. He wanted to see everyone succeed. He was aware that, as we regain our cultural identities and our

strength as Indigenous people, we will make tangible change on our coast.

**CB:** Beau was working very quickly, wasn't he, when you joined him?

**AH:** Yes. And at that point in his career, it was all in his head. He could take a piece of wood with bark on it and a felt pen and draw an ugly centre line on it and just pick up an adze and ten minutes later it's a face. I have video of him doing a mask in thirteen minutes. It was all in his head. He didn't have to stop and draw a line. He didn't have to stop and use a knife because he was so deadly with that adze, he could get it eighty percent done with the roughing-out tool, go over it once with a knife, and paint it. You know, he was one with that adze, and that's what he preached. It's about getting comfortable with your tools. There are a lot of elements that you can't really be taught. You've got to feel it, you know? You've got to become one with your tool, and they're all different. All the adzes have slightly different angles, and the blades are different widths. Some of them aren't flat. You get used to your own tools, and you make magic.

**CB:** I know you've had a chance to see the masks that Beau made when he was young. Did he ever speak about them?

**AH:** Most of the stuff is compact but really well executed. Beau was capable of the finest detail. Recently



he did Cleopatra. He was working on Caravaggio's *Goliath*. Yeah, it was this massive head, and it was fucking wild. But the little pieces, they were fantastic. I loved them all, and I almost wanted to buy one, but it was sold before I could. It was really something to see those early pieces and to have his show followed by an exhibition of work by Cole and myself in the same gallery. It was awesome to see that little *Wind* mask and to place it beside one I saw him make more recently. I could see how much he'd evolved. He was constantly evolving and experimenting. Just when you think you've got him figured out, he makes Caravaggio's *Goliath* out of wood.

**CB:** How did that decision come about?

**AH:** I wasn't there, but Cole was, and he said Beau came bursting into the studio at three in the morning. He'd dreamt about it, and he just started attacking this piece of wood with a chainsaw and adze. Yeah, when lightning struck, you could tell. He would dream about things. Sometimes, he would just ask a piece of wood what it wanted to be and then touch it, close his eyes, then he'd make it. He had a way of experimenting with every nook and cranny of a certain character. How many Bookwus masks did he make? You know, he was trying out different things. He'd say, "Okay, now I'm going to try one like this." He could evolve

within a single character, then he might move onto the next thing.

**CB:** I want to ask you about painting, and about how some people become gifted painters.

**AH:** We have to be. Some people will say that it's harder than painting on canvas because we have to go around corners, and wood has imperfections. You have the contours of the mask to contend with, so having properly mixed paint and quality brushes is an asset.

**CB:** What do you hope to carry forward that you learned from Beau?

**AH:** He opened my mind. He was able to put life into perspective, and our culture. He led by example and he did it in a beautiful way. He was the first guy to pick up a tool and just do what needed to be done, to pay other people out of his own pocket, to do something for them for free. And that's really what it means to "Potlatch." We must hold close the idea that one's wealth is measured not by how much one accumulates, but rather by how much one gives to their people. Beau lived by that every day. Now, as an active Chief of the Kwagui, I can only strive to Potlatch to the degree of generations past. It will be interesting to see when the next Beau shows up. I don't know who it's going to be, but he'll be back.

*This interview with Cole Speck was conducted in Vancouver, BC, on December 30, 2019.*

**Colin Browne:** You had the honour, Cole, of working very closely with Beau Dick. Can you tell me how you came to be his apprentice?

**Cole Speck:** I worked with Beau for the last ten years of his life. I began the apprenticeship with him when I was sixteen years old and never looked back. I was dating his daughter at the time, and he asked me, “Do you want to learn how to carve, Cole?” I said, “Oh, yeah. Heck, yes. Yeah, I do, very much so.” He said, “All right, we’ll start then.” That was it.

The first mask I ever made was a Moss mask, part of the Atlakim set of masks. It took me quite some time to get it finished, but it was lots of fun, and I never looked back after that. Ever since I was a little kid, I wanted to be a carver. I had already laid the foundation, the muscle memory if you like, by using tools and watching people carve. Growing up in Alert Bay, I was fully immersed in the arts.

So, Beau started me off with that first mask. I think it was after the second mask that I did with him, which was also an Atlakim mask, that he looked at me and said, “You know, Cole, you probably won’t ever amount to much as an artist, but there might come a day when somebody’s going to need a mask, and you’re going to know how

to carve that mask. That’ll make it all worth it for me.” Or, he’d say, “You might be broke and starving, and you’ll know how to quickly whip up a plaque and sell it for twenty bucks or something to get some money for food or something like that. Then it’ll all be worthwhile.” I’m thinking, “Jeez! Cut me pretty deep with that one.” He probably figured I would just give up because that’s what happens with a lot of people. They get grandiose ideas about making all kinds of money as an artist, as a carver, not realizing that’s not how it goes, and just how physically hard it is, and even mentally how hard it is to have to bring your wares to the marketplace. To create things and really put yourself out there, it’s not an easy thing to do. So, he probably just assumed that I was going to give up, but I didn’t. In fact, it made me want to try even harder when he said that to me. I was like, “I’ll show you!” [laughs]

**CB:** Perhaps he was testing you.

**CS:** He might’ve been. But I stuck with it, and I stuck with him. I realized that if I was going to have a shot at learning how to make really cool things, he was the best option for me to work with. It wasn’t just the artwork though. It was a full-on tutelage of the cultural aspect of things, and the meanings behind all



In 2017, Tsonoqua [Dzunuk'wa] travelled to Athens, Greece as part of Beau Dick's participation in documenta 14.

these things that we were making, and the business side as well, and understanding different relationships and how these relationships can benefit each other, the art, and the culture. It's nice to make nice things, but what are you going to do with them? What is the benefit? How, at the end of the day, will this help everybody out? Beau's art wasn't about him as much as it was about helping out the communities he was part of. It's these teachings I hold onto—trying to help other people reach their potential, not only in terms of art but in all aspects of life.

**CB:** Could you talk a bit more about Beau's teaching style?

**CS:** When I first joined him to work at UBC, he said, "You know, Cole. I can teach you a lot, but I can't teach you everything. You have to move around. You've got to learn from other people, too. That's what's important. You're not always going to learn how to do things, but you will, at the very least, learn how not to do things." It took me a long time to learn how to learn from him. I know that sounds kind of weird because he was a great teacher, but you had to know how

to learn from him. He would show me five or six steps on one side of a mask...and then I had to figure out how to get to the same step over on the other side. And he always did the easy side! If I couldn't figure it out, he'd fix it for me and give me shit, and then it wouldn't happen again. Now, as a result, when I watch other people work, I pick up what they're doing quite easily, and I understand the reasoning.

When I carve a mask I ask, "Why does the face look like that? Why does it have this big grinning mouth or these sharp pointed eyebrows?" There's a reasoning behind it. You have to understand the energy that's associated with that expression, and how to guide that energy into where you want it to go. Everything is energy, right? How do you harness that energy and allow it to come out of the wood? Some people's masks are quite dull, even though they're nicely finished, but they've got no feeling. They don't grab you. But then you walk beside one of Beau's masks and it always grabs your attention, no matter what. It will always make you look at it. He managed to make the energy happen. He was like that in life.

**CB:** It's clear that Beau wanted his apprentices to carry his teachings forward.

**CS:** It's a big responsibility. I'm just a link in the chain, a link for future

generations. It's not even necessarily about the making of art. Part of Beau's teachings was that it's not about me. It's about the greater good, the cultural aspect of things, and helping maintain that to whatever extent I can.

**CB:** Let's talk about the masks Beau made when he was a young man that were exhibited last year at Fazakas Gallery.

**CS:** My God, are they amazing. He was about the same age as me right now. Aren't they something? They were done so masterfully. They're mostly all really small pieces, but they're so delicately and finely finished. Even the rough ones are still very finely finished. You know, there was that little box. It's only this big, but it's a full-on box design.

**CB:** He was clearly trying out different styles.

**CS:** He began to emulate those different styles by working with people from different areas and by understanding how to carve those styles in a traditional way, maintaining the traditional aspect by recreating masterpieces from the generations before. But he never referred to himself as a "master." He was a student of life. He was always learning. Even up to the time of his death, he was learning stuff. That was a really important concept for me to grasp because it had seemed that he knew everything, yet he was still learning.

It blew my mind. That's what made him such an amazing artist; he was constantly consuming information. He didn't read, but he could read pictures, if that makes sense. He would look at the pictures, and he was reading them. Then he was able to recreate those pieces.

**CB:** Beau was also a very good painter.

**CS:** Was he ever a good painter! He started with his dad and his grandfather in Alert Bay, carving with them when he was quite young. I think he was only about ten or eleven years old, maybe not even that old. I think he was working with Doug Cranmer here in Vancouver for a period of time, and with Bill Reid. He went and worked with the Hunts in Victoria for a period of time, and there were many more that he worked with in the early stages of his career.

**CB:** Looking back on Beau's astonishing career, how would you describe his legacy?

**CS:** What Beau brought to the equation was true belief in the cultural system and everything that it entails. Everybody who worked with him started to understand and to reinforce those beliefs, along with the idea of giving and not hoarding things — sharing, if you will. You know, what he brought to the table was just sheer generosity. Most people, when they think of generosity, think

of giving to charity or something like that, but he was so generous with his time, with his money, with everything. You know, I could talk about the art and the beautiful artistic legacy that we've become a part of, but the art was just the vessel for him. It was just a means to Potlatch. He had such beautiful things to say, such inspiring things to say to so many people all the time. It seemed like he really knew what people needed to hear. One of my favourite sayings of his is, "Don't give up. Just don't give up. You're right there. Don't give up." I think the generosity is the biggest part of his legacy.

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