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Chris Wheeler - Fisherman turned artist

by *Charity Winters*



In a junior high art class when he was 14 years old, Chris Wheeler discovered that he had a particular talent for painting. Two years later he completed his first piece: an oil painting of the family dairy farm in California. Now Chris is displaying his 90 or more paintings in his own gallery and recognition for his exceptional work is spreading across the state.

Just a few weeks ago, one of Chris's paintings was displayed in the Anchorage Museum of History and Art at a reception commemorating the 17th anniversary of the grounding of the Exxon Valdez. The large 3ft by 4ft painting depicts the Exxon Valdez floating through a brilliantly colored ocean mixed with the steaming mess of the crude oil spill in 1989. Using a special substance, Wheeler was able to work in actual crude oil from the spill into his painting. Since he was in Valdez trying to fish

Fishing has been a huge part of life for Chris and he gets out when he can. Years ago, Chris would spend his winters in the Philippines when fishing was closed. There he met his wife, Tata. The couple now has 2 children, Darrell (8) and Alliah (4). Chris has since gotten rid of his boat because the maintenance was becoming too expensive. Now he simply flies into his "spots" and charters a boat to fish out his 27,000 lb. halibut IFQs. He has permits for areas south of Kodiak and Dutch Harbor. His fishing trips have inspired many of his paintings. In fact, one of the reasons Chris has more recently begun to pursue more recognition for his art is that he feels he's "getting too old for fishing."

Right now, Chris is continuing to set up his gallery in the café section of his store. His gallery is divided into different Alaskan

at the time, he had collected some of it and has kept it all these years. When Chris was working on the painting this spring, a visiting speaker from Cook Inlet Keepers came to look at the painting and told the Alaska Center for Environment about it. They then contacted Chris about using it at their reception. It also appeared in the Loussac Library as a background for the evening news covering the event.

Chris has been a Seldovian since 1969 when he came fresh out of high school to work at the Jakalof Bay logging mill. In 1976, Chris opened up a small grocery store and called it Wheeler's Store. Later on, he closed it for a few years to go fishing and stored all his crab pots at the front of the store. That's how the store got its current name, the CrabPot Café. The grocery part of the store has continued for years, supplying locals with a variety of goods from the other side of the bay. The "café" part has been off and on. This year Wheeler is not sure what will happen as the cook he expected might not be in town this summer. Also, he is reluctant to have greasy foods because of the damage it might cause to his paintings.

themes. One section displays several intricate paintings of beautiful and historic Russian Orthodox churches. Another shows off the mountains and wildlife. He is currently working on a section dedicated to different parts of Alaska: Southeast, the Aleutian chain, and the Bering Sea. Chris is hoping to begin a spot for "old Seldovia" paintings. He also showed me several paintings that he is hoping to enter into a juried art show at the Pratt Museum featuring "Extreme Art" themes such as "Extreme Weather", "Extreme Latitude" and the like.

I think what I enjoyed the most about Chris's gallery was that it was like walking through a history of his life. I saw his first painting of his boyhood home in California, then a painting of the Jakalof lumber mill where he had his first job in Alaska. There was a picture of Brook's Range and the pipeline, where he worked for a short time and then onto his fishing life – Valdez, the Bering Sea, the Aleutians, Southeast, Seldovia. It was a beautiful picture of what we, as Alaskans, are so fortunate to be able to enjoy because of where we choose to live. Although Chris's paintings say it ever so much better than I can. As he put it, "A picture speaks a thousand words."



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