

# TED EMRICK—

## MAKING ART AND TAKING ACTION

By Susan Stewart

**B**EHIND A PAIR OF HANDMADE GLASS DOORS ON an unassuming neighborhood street in Los Osos lies the entrancing world of artist / activist Ted Emrick. From the handcrafted bread oven under an open-air studio, to the handmade stone countertops in his sunny kitchen; from the “zen den” where he creates and works, to the customized van that carries his latest commissioned pieces ready for delivery (today it’s a torso done in horizontal glass and metal stripes)—everywhere the visitor looks are objects that carry a heartfelt human story. And Ted Emrick is inspired by all of them.

That dome-shaped brick oven in the corner? Emrick made it for a baker friend who wanted to start his own business but lacked the materials. That rusty, antique fire extinguisher sitting on a tree stump? Perfect for his next glass-and-metal project, perhaps to honor local firefighters whose long hard summer is not over yet. That coffin-sized kiln full of red-hot molten glass? All fired up for a series of glass waves that will become awards to recognize extraordinary achievements.

Born and raised with a brother and sister in the little seaside town of Solano Beach in San Diego County, Emrick has always felt a deep connection with the ocean. His father Tom was a “rocket scientist” for Gulf General Atomics; his mother Joy sold real estate. He describes an idyllic childhood, with supportive parents and sweet summer adventures.

But Ted suffered from severe dyslexia, a condition that was not recognized ‘til much later in his life. He had a tough time with reading and writing. So, he says, “I had to create my own language ... with art.” A college teacher would one day identify Ted’s dyslexia and assured him he was in good company: Albert Einstein, Tom Cruise, Steven Spielberg, Mohammed Ali, and perhaps most relevant to Ted’s career, Pablo Picasso!

Emrick would eventually earn not one, but three degrees, in art: One in two-dimensional art, one in three-dimensional art, and a BFA (Bachelor’s in Fine Art) from San Francisco’s Art Institute on a full-ride scholarship he won from the Morro Bay Art Society.



Ted with MBHS Ceramics class



Necessity has often been the “mother of invention” for Emrick. In school, he had no money for costly canvass or pricey paints. So he used old glass and leftover house paint to create the required pieces, often diving into dumpsters to retrieve the “found objects” that ended up in his work. Inspired by brilliant underdogs who exhibit great courage to pursue what they believe in, Emrick cites Michaelangelo, Nikola Tesla, and his college art teacher, Jim Alford among those who have inspired his career.

Today, he is a contemporary multi-media painter and sculptor who uses anything and everything to create works purchased by such famous buyers as Apple Computers, Caesar’s Palace, hotels in Las Vegas, Chicago, and Beverly Hills, the Berkeley Library, and the late Merv Griffin. His artistic achievements are stunning by any standard. Visit [www.emrickstudios.com](http://www.emrickstudios.com) to view just a small sampling of the wall-sized paintings (many depicting sea creatures) and unique glass and metal sculptures, doors, windows, and hangings that now adorn homes, restaurants, and hotels.

But Emrick long ago discovered that art is much more than its physical beauty. “As an artist, I’m trained to really look in at the subject,” he explains. “To see the detail others miss. ... It’s no surprise when artists become politically charged later in their careers.”

“I became involved with my daughter’s education early on,” he continued. (Sierra Emrick is now 19 and a student at UC Santa Barbara.) “I started donating time to her kindergarten class and shortly found a need for more creativity.” Today, Emrick devotes two days a week to art students at Morro Bay High School.

It was while lecturing a group of sixth-graders about the dubious future of a world that continues to use fossil fuels that he had his own aha moment. “I realized I could not talk the talk anymore without walking the walk.” So he sold his truck, converted his cars to run on waste vegetable oil, and created [begreen.org](http://begreen.org), a non-profit dedicated





Emrick's glass awards

to guiding others toward a greener, more environmentally conscious lifestyle.

That experience demonstrated the enormous power of art when used to inspire action. "Art is so much more than visual," he insists. "Art can change the world for the better. It's about what it *is*, but it's also about what it *does*."

Since then, Emrick divides his time between his art and his community. He is deeply touched by the social injustices and environmental assaults that affect the world, and he is moved to take action. To date, Emrick has been involved creatively and organizationally with Surfing for Hope (Hearst Cancer Research Center), AmpSurf (Association of Amputee Surfers), Art Legacy Project (Baywood Elementary School), Native Plant Garden Project (Jane Goodall Institute), and the Morro Bay High School Soccer Program among many others. Last year he created and hosted the Los Osos / Baywood Climate Change Festival to raise awareness and generate action. With the help of generous donors Paul and Jessica Irving, plus website guru Eileen Vavra, Emrick brought speakers, poets, live music, and politicians together for a day of sunshine, enlightenment, and optimism. That event also boasted the largest floating peace sign in the world, made from kayaks, canoes, and small sailboats.

This year, Emrick was approached to head Morro Bay High School's contribution to The Cow Parade, an international phenomenon that has been dubbed "The World's Largest (and most successful!) Public Art Event." It is first and foremost an artistic endeavor but with a charitable benefit. Supplied by the



Ted and his daughter, Sierra

Cow Parade Holdings Corporation, a standard life-sized cow sculpture made of flame-retardant fiberglass with steel rebar reinforcement is shipped to participating artists. The cow (which comes in three different poses) is then painted or otherwise adorned, is put on public display, and is eventually auctioned off. The money generated goes to hospitals and children's organizations such as Save the Children and Special Olympics.

"Cow Parade events have been staged in 80 cities worldwide," says [www.cowparade.com](http://www.cowparade.com), "and more than \$30 million has been raised for non-profits around the world since 1999."

From September 17, 2016 through April 30, 2017, the finished cows from dozens of artists county-wide will be found on public trails and elsewhere around the county to be admired by one and all. Emrick's students have chosen tile mosaic as the decorative medium for their cow. Just Google Cow



Glass wave on pedestal

Parade San Luis Obispo for a more complete description of the artists, locations, and events that will generate funds and spark creativity for many weeks to come.

For Emrick, the Cow Parade speaks to all he values: the student artists, the worthy causes, and the inventiveness it requires. "We all have an opportunity to give back," he says. "Whether it's donating time to inspire others, creating a worthy cause, or funding one. We all have a chance to be more than just ourselves."

As for the future, Emrick is always looking forward—to the next piece, the next cause, the next student. He is especially proud of his daughter, Sierra, who is earning a degree in Environmental Studies while she minors in Spanish. A one-time Artist of the Year at Morro Bay High School, Sierra is on scholarship for UCSB's track team as their second all-time pole vaulter. Father and daughter have recently been enticed by the Tiny Home movement, imagining what they might contribute to it.

Looking at his body of work, the list of awards, the roster of achievements, the number of nonprofits to his credit, one wonders how it all gets done. To that, Emrick has an eat-dessert-first philosophy: We all have things to trudge through every day to keep our lives going, he explained. And then there are the things that really excite us, the really fun things. "Do the exciting things first!" he advises. "Don't worry about the trudge. My job is to know that my work is bigger than my art. My goal is to be creative in a way that honors my conscience. My job is to inspire others to step up and do the work that is truest to themselves. The trudge can wait in line."



Ted and M.B. Fire Chief, Steve Knuckles with the MBHS Cow Parade contribution