

Tom Risser has been skateboarding since he was 13. Now the welding artist designs skateparks. Even after suffering a major heart attack, today Tom still skates and creates metal sculptures.

NC Artist Designs Skate Parks For A Living

Hannah Barnes

Banked powerslides. Frontside slash grinds. Long 50/50 grinds. Skateboarder, artist, business owner and book writer Tom Risser speeds around on his skateboard.

Risser started skateboarding in 1976 when he was 13-years-old. He blossomed as an artist at 34-- creating amazing sculptures of welded metal.

"He is devoted to skateboarding, art and life!" said Jason Barnes, a skateboarder who has been coming to Risser's skate parks and bowls for 25 years.

Risser's style of skateboarding and positive outlook on life have made him a hero and legend for many locals.

"He's very positive, here on Earth to live life to its fullest," said family friend and fellow skateboarder Chuck Powell.

And that's exactly what Risser does-- starting with his skateboarding. While it wasn't something that came easily to him, he didn't let that stop him.

"It felt good--which made you want to keep practicing... which led to improvement," Risser said. "It has never been easy-- I used to take weeks to get a trick, but it still feels natural to stand on a board. More natural than running."

So is his art. As soon as he cut into his first piece of metal, Risser found out that welding was for him.

"My first big stand-alone sculpture was a six-foot tall guy on a skateboard that is in front of a skatepark in Wilmington, NC," Tom said.

Risser's art can now be found almost all over North Carolina, not only in the form of welded metal sculptures, but as actual skateparks.

"His skateparks are extremely abstract but in the coolest way possible. It's what life's all about as far as expression goes-- constant ups and downs," said Barnes.



Above: Riding a skateboard at his home in Waxaw, NC, Tom Risser catches air in his personal bowl last year. Below: In his garage studio, Tom welds a coyote head for an outdoor creation on Oct. 7. Metal art is just one of his passions.

Powell agrees.

"[The skateparks] are like an outdoor art museum," he said.

A skate-able art exhibit turns out to be Risser's full intention. He felt that sculptures that are ignored fail at being art when in a public space.

"My best combination is art that you can skate," Risser said. "If I am bringing a skatepark to the world, then I am not doing what everyone else is already doing. Be different. Be original. Change the experience from the cookie-cutter approach."

Based on the designs of Whipsnake, near Liberty Hill SC, and Waxhaw S8, on Caldwell St

It was while he was at one of his skateparks-- on New Year's Day to be exact, that "it" happened. "It" being a heart attack.

"I had a quintuple bypass heart surgery...which is just crazy to wrap my brain around...bad genes I guess," Risser said.

A complicated procedure that treats severely blocked arteries that feed the heart, bypass surgery is serious.

"We had a party to say thanks to everyone who supported myself and my family through it all," said Risser, "My surgeon and ICU nurse came, along with the amazing skate community to celebrate life."

The hospital created a short film about him because of his amazing positive attitude through it all.

"One of the keys is to draw energy from those who support you-- such as family and friends," Risser said.

It was that positive attitude and great physical condition from skateboarding that brought him through the recovery process so well. He ended up back on his board six weeks later.

"Life throws curves at you, but there is always someone who has it worse-- so suck it up and keep pounding...heart and mind," said Risser.

After it all, it took him about nine months to rebuild his stamina. Still, he has to watch for dehydration and deal with dizziness.

"I still can't do much with that side of my arm/shoulder...but just because I can't do a handplant this month [isn't] an excuse," Risser said. "I still ride every weekend and love every chance to flow around on the best four-wheel transportation device I own."

Everything about skateboarding makes Tom Risser feel alive and free. At once, he feels like he is a part of the surface below and around him, he says.

"Life is JOY. Create joy."

**“Life is JOY.
Create joy.”**

NC, Risser definitely hit that original approach.

"I worked with the landscape to allow the drainage to flow as it did before the park was added into the same place," he said. "It flows with the environment rather than battles against it. But I still didn't get it the way I wanted... so I am constantly tweaking it."