

## | CODY, WYOMING'S MIKE POULSEN

## Personal Challenges Inspire Intensity and Optimism

*"Your profession is not what brings home your paycheck; it's what you were put on the earth to do with such passion and intensity that it becomes spiritual in your nature or your calling."*

Those words of Vincent van Gogh flow easily from Mike Poulsen, Marine Corps veteran, former outfitter and guide and long-time acclaimed artist. Throughout his 52 years, Poulsen has learned much about passion and intensity – both in real life and the art it inspires.

One of eight children, the Ohio native always loved to draw. "It was something quiet I could do. The Akron Art Institute was next door to the coffee shop my mom ran. It was my number one babysitter. Art was a niche where no one else interfered with me."

When Mike was 13 his father moved the clan to a 15,000-acre Wyoming cattle ranch. "He always told us we were land rich but dirt poor. We believed him and we all worked together, running the place. We were in the outfitting, hunting and dude business. Mom was a great cook and

Dad had a knack for people. Through the years we had a lot of super people come visit – John Wayne, Kurt Gowdy, Slim Pickens. My folks worked all but one month of the year when we closed down for repairs."

That changed in 1977. Mike had just returned from a stint in the Marine Corps when his dad was killed in a hunting accident. It was the beginning of a string of personal challenges – experiences Mike Poulsen said now infuse his life with optimism.

Family was vitally important to Mike and his wife Shauna, but they had difficulty

conceiving. In 1978, the world's first "test-tube" baby gave them new hope. With the aid of the dramatically innovative in vitro fertilization, twins – April and Michael – made the family complete in 1984. Less than two years later their father was diagnosed with leukemia.

Mike Poulsen remembered that "At the time the survival rate was very small. But Shauna said, 'after all we went through to have these children, you have to live to raise them. I had the will, the incentive and the prayers to bring me through. There was no other option but to live.'"

And, despite his doctors' warnings that he might never paint again, Mike Poulsen knew that life without art wasn't for him. "On December 12, 1985, I had a bone marrow transplant," he explained. "It was extremely difficult afterwards; my hands shook. I was so weak it was a struggle to hold a brush. The doctors said that 90% of leukemia survivors change their jobs. But I told them, 'I am an artist. When I go home I'm still going to be an artist.' That desire gave me much more drive."

Now there are no bad days for Mike Poulsen. The family's ranch was sold long ago. His brothers and sisters scattered across the country and his mom moved into Cody, but Mike and Shauna built a house on acreage next to the old place. There he lives out his dreams. "It's idyllic; we are at just



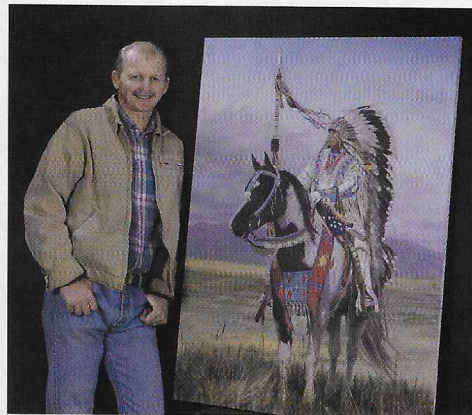
**above:** Yellowstone Park serves as inspiration for much of Mike Poulsen's work including *Geyser Basin*, oil/linen.

over 6,000 feet looking out over the valley. I've discovered that everything about life brings me joy now – especially my family and then my art."

His stamina and health have improved and he thinks his art has gotten better, too. "I just keep attacking it. I think that with age and proficiency my art has evolved. I can use oil like watercolor now. I paint on paper like the old masters Bierstadt and Moran. All my set-ups are the same, so my process is simpler. I think that's made me a better painter."

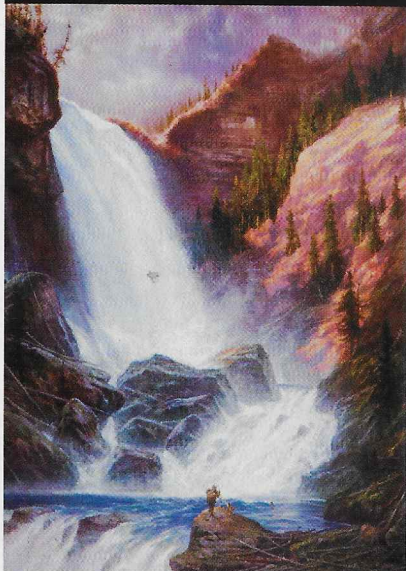
His reputation reflects that progress. Recently he was selected to paint the portrait of Colorado Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell for the Smithsonian's new National Museum of the Native American. He does about five museum shows a year, has work in a vast number of private collections and has been invited to far-flung places such as England and Russia.

"I love the travel – especially meeting so many wonderful people. But I live next to one of the greatest parks in the world, Yellowstone. In the summertime this is where I like to find myself about 99% of the time. I've got sketches to make and material to gather for winter's work. I don't want to waste any time." ■



**above:**  
Mike Poulsen and his painting *Ben Nighthorse/Cheyenne* (Senator Colorado), part of the Smithsonian's new National Museum of the Native American exhibit.

## M.C. POULSEN



*Hidden Falls - Yellowstone* 50 x 36 in. oil/linen



*Ben Nighthorse - Cheyenne* 50 x 36 in. oil/linen

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