



Ben Rising cuts a rubber stencil to prepare a headstone for sandblasting at Pioneer Rock & Monument.

Stories Set In Stone

Family-operated business works to share the story of loved ones

By Jeanie Senior

Kris Rising laughs when she recalls what happened when her husband, Bob, called their youngest son, Ben, to ask if he had ever thought of joining the family business, Pioneer Rock & Monument.

“Only every day,” replied Ben, who was out of college and doing landscaping jobs in St. George, Utah. He and his wife, Marantha, and 1-year-old daughter, Taylor, relocated to Goldendale in 2004. Their daughter, Taryn, was born after the move.

The business has operated the past 31 years, and it has grown to fill a particular niche, making custom-designed headstones and grave markers for customers in all 50 states, Canada, Guam and Puerto Rico. Ben says about 70 to 80

percent of their orders come from Native Americans.

Kris credits referrals for growing that part of their business.

“Once you get somebody to trust you and they like your work, word-of-mouth is the very best advertising,” she says.

Meanwhile, the number of stone cutting businesses has declined. The nearest similar businesses are in Yakima and Oregon.

Pioneer Rock & Monument started after Bob was laid off from the local aluminum plant. The state offered to pay for retraining. A newspaper story about the headstone business caught his interest.

The trade traditionally is passed



The Rising family, from left, Ben, Taryn, Marintha, Taylor and Kris, plus dog Kindle. Above right, Bob points to a photo of himself as a young soldier in Vietnam featured along the military wall at Pioneer Rock & Monument. Right, headstones are made in a variety of shapes and sizes, and often use imagery to tell a story.

down through generations, and there are no training programs. Bob persisted and found a stonemason in Yakima who agreed to train him. He wrote the curriculum himself. The state has reused it several times, Kris says.

Bob's interest in art and history led him to create custom headstones to suit the person whose grave they marked.

Early on, he drew the design for the headstone and hand-cut the stencils. Ben says it could take all day to letter a stone.

Ben now uses a printer that applies the design to a stabilized rubber stencil in about half an hour. The stone carving takes place in a sandblasting booth, where Ben uses a high-pressure wand loaded with aluminum oxide powder to cut the design.

Technology has made headstone design choices almost limitless. Black-and-white photos can be transferred to metal plates and inset on the stone surface. Color photos can be inset on porcelain.

New technology also allows a metal

QR code card to be attached, which links to more information about the deceased.

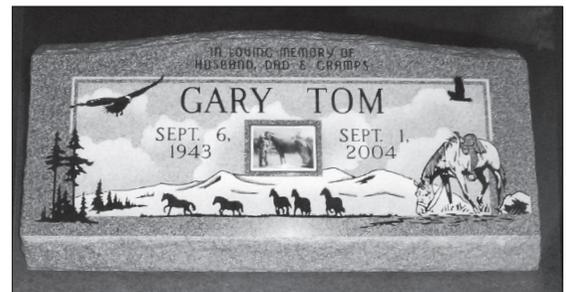
Customers can customize orders—including shape, size, colors and additional artwork—at www.pioneerrock.com.

Some people's headstones tell their life stories, with religious symbols, Native American art, Western or sports themes. The Risings have created grave markers with pictures of cars, horses, eagles and scenery, from Mount Adams to Celilo Falls.

Kris, who is the point-of-contact person for the business, works with customers to create the final design.

"It sounds like a weird thing, but I enjoy doing that because I enjoy helping them through a hard time," Kris says. "Most people say they've never been to a business like this before. I try to help people through the process. It's tough."

Bob is mostly retired, although he cuts the firewood for the workshop stove. He is chiefly responsible for the museum-like



history displays on the walls of the office building. A military section includes a photo of Bob as a young soldier in Vietnam. Another area is devoted to photos and documents about his family's homestead in the mountains of Idaho.

Ben and Marintha's daughters are growing up with the business. Marintha now keeps the books for the business.

The business extends past grave markers and headstones.

Their work is found throughout the Mid-Columbia. Projects include the signs at each of Klickitat PUD's substations; small stones identifying the plants in the garden at the Discovery Center in The Dalles; and an elegant black granite monument in both Japanese and English in Hood River that marks 30 years of sister city relations with Tsuruta, Japan. ■