RAISE THE ROOF: James Library

Handsome Studio owners reconstruct Jewish-Polish history, architecture

Students and professional timber framers raise a hand-hewn timber into place on a sidewalk of the Gwoździec synagogue reconstruction at the Museum of Folk Architecture in Sanok, Poland, 2011. Courtesy Photo/Trillium Studios

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Norwell sculptors Rick and Laura Brown are both college professors at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, but they don’t consider themselves teachers.

“We’re makers,” Rick said. “Our passion is making and our dedication is making.”

There’s a lot to discover from taking an object and making it using the tools and methods from the time and place it was created, Rick said, and they learn right alongside their students.

“When you replicate an object using the same tools, the same methods, you reveal aspects of that culture that are imbedded in that object that you can’t find any other way,” he said.

And that’s exactly what happened when the Browns set out to reconstruct the Gwoździec Synagogue, an 18th century structure in Poland that rivals the greatest wooden architecture in history. They not only learned about the synagogue, but they also discovered a lost piece of history and culture, Rick said.

“Many people, including Jewish people, don’t even know about the synagogues the Nazis destroyed because of the extent of the destruction and because it’s too painful to look back at that history,” Rick said. “The only thing people were remembering was the horror, but now this is revealing 1,000
years of Jewish history in Poland—not only were they a major cultural force, but they were merchants, educators, artists, and writers."

The Browns, who own the Handshouse Studio in Norwell, are now inviting community members to share their journey during the screening of a film called "Raise the Roof" that depicts both the effort to reconstruct the replica as well as the synagogue's history.

Library Director Caroline Chapin said she was excited to host Rick and Laura Brown.

"They are local, right here from Norwell," she said. "It's a phenomenal story and they are visionary people. We are honored to have them at the James."

During the documentary, filmmakers Yari Wolinsky and Cary Wolinsky, also an award-winning National Geographic photographer, go behind the scenes to reveal the Browns' decade-long endeavor to recreate a nearly-lost piece of Polish Jewish history.

"World War II and the Holocaust is the big story of the 20th century and this really is an untold story of an atrocity that happened as a result of that," Rick said, noting that at one time, there were some 200 wooden synagogues across the Polish-Lithuanian countryside. None survived destruction during the Nazi occupation of Poland, he said.

This briskly-paced film examines how the synagogue was built, who built it, and why. With the Browns leading more than 300 students and professionals from 16 countries, filmmakers said it captures the echoes of World War II while revealing an optimistic and creative time in Jewish history that has been lost.

"This film is about a remarkable dream and a journey of re-discovery. It is a story of larger-than-life characters -- one that starts with tragedy and ends in triumph," director Yari Wolinsky of Trillium Studios said. "It highlights the cautious optimism of a new generation and a growing dialogue between Jews and Poles about the past and the future, providing a unique and positive way to connect with Jewish history."

The Browns recently returned from a trip to Georgia, where the film was screened three times during the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival.

"It was fantastic," Rick said. "It's a very emotional film and afterwards we had a half hour for questions, but everyone wanted to keep going. There were a lot of good questions. The responses were very positive and very supportive."

Rick and Laura moved from Brookline to Norwell about 20 years ago when they were looking for a larger space for their studio.

"It's very difficult to have a studio in the city, especially when you work on large projects. Sculptors make a lot of noise and we're not good neighbors," he said. "We needed space to build a large studio."

The Handshouse Studio is a 501c3 non-profit organization that focuses on education and creating adventurous hands-on projects through community service.

Although they’ve taken part in educational films and TV shows in the past, Rick said this film was a different experience for them.

"The Wolinsky's focused on the subject, but also how we solved a problem using the educational method," Rick said, noting that both the history of the synagogue as well as the 21-years of hard work that went into recreating it.

Admission will be free, but donations will be accepted and encouraged, Rick said, noting that more money is still needed to make sure the film can reach a global audience.

Seating is limited to 80 people, and Chapin asked that anyone planning to attend reserve a seat by calling 781-659-7100.