

John P. Casey, Jr (Casey)
Bohemian Artist & Philosopher
World Class Wood Sculptor and Warren Wilson College Professor
October 3, 1943 to February 24, 2017
johncaseyphilosopherartist.com

What makes a Bohemian?

On the surface, John Casey led a seemingly conventional life, but the deeper reality of that life was non-conformist and Bohemian. As a boy he lived a gypsy childhood traveling with his family across the Midwest and Southwest United States, helping his father build concrete grain elevators. A foreman at the age of fourteen, Casey gathered and directed workers with various backgrounds living in small towns from Mexico to Canada. Employing the precise and exacting knowledge passed on to him by his father, he taught those in his charge the skills required, including plumbing, electrical wiring, cement pouring, and rough woodworking. At the same time, because his family often moved twice a year, Casey was enrolled in an estimated fifty-six grammar and high schools, some more than once.

As a young man, Casey attended Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa excelling at math, but electing philosophy, the intellectual path he followed through an M.A. at the University of Chicago, and a Ph.D. at the University of Iowa. Because of his combined practical knowledge and math skills, Casey was asked to set the national standard for Air Force and Army placement exams required of all registrants for the draft.

Long disenchanted with the hypocrisy of his parents' Southern Baptist faith culminating in its support of the war in Vietnam, the more conventional Casey fell away and the Bohemian emerged. He embraced non-violent anarchy as a political philosophy, and counseled draft resisters, also helping those who wanted leave the United States for Canada. Much sought after by the military due to his placement scores, Casey instead demonstrated against the war and applied for Conscientious Objector status, which was denied. He was subsequently Classified 1A, but was never called up by his draft board.

As the Vietnam War ended, the Bohemian Casey left college teaching and began to repair antiques as a way to teach himself fine woodworking. After some years spent restoring furniture, designing and installing wooden spiral staircases and other architectural elements such as cabinets in homes, and pews and wooden "linen" in churches, Casey began to focus on his own designs. Among his works were an "Ark of the Covenant" as a chest depicting suffering and war, a tinker-toy table and chairs, and inlaid screens and tables of exotic wood, one based on the story of Conan, the Barbarian. He also began a series of human figures as furniture. Among these was "The Flasher," whose coat, when opened, revealed a chest of drawers, and "Norman Jean," a transvestite dressed as Marilyn Monroe and titled "Liquor Cellarette."

After being diagnosed with a debilitating disease of the hands, Casey returned to teaching. As a Philosophy Professor at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina, his practical skills served the college's mission of combining intellectual and applied work. His intellect and business experience coupled with his wide ranging background, led to him serving as Interim Vice President and Dean of the College for 3 years from 2009 to 2012. He then returned to the classroom, teaching what he loved – Eastern Philosophy, Everyday and Environmental Ethics, and the Philosophy of Ecology.

Casey espoused a personal philosophy that combined Buddhism, Daoism, and Native American spiritual teaching. He constructed a sweat lodge at his home for meditation and purification, and while exploring Daoism and other belief systems with his students, he began a ritual of early morning naked runs through the privacy of WWC's forests in an effort to experience the state of "oneness." The College may not have been prepared for these Bohemian practices, but it tolerated them.

For their part, Casey's students respected his privacy and commitment to what he believed and practiced, and gave abundant testimony at his memorial service to his influence on their lives and their ability to free themselves from conventional constraints.

John Casey was a true Bohemian who not only talked the talk, but walked the walk.

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For further information, please contact Rebecca Casey
rebeccacasey38@gmail.com
828.713.7748