

# Swimming River

Serving Colts Neck and Lincroft

## Life



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# The Iceman Cometh

For 35 Years, Sculptor Has Enjoyed His Chilly Canvas

# Carving Out His Own Niche: Sculptor Turns Ice Into Art

*For Colts Neck resident Kevin O'Malley, every day is freezing when he's at work producing his icy creations.*

*by Art Petrosemolò  
Community contributor*

**D**escribing Kevin O'Malley's job as "cool" is (pardon the pun) just the tip of the iceberg. He spends hours in ski pants, parka, wool hat and gloves using a chain saw and carving tools while working on 300-pound ice blocks in a freezer. What's cooler than that?

O'Malley, a resident of Colts Neck, turns ice into spectacular works of art to grace weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, christenings, bar mitzvahs and special parties. He works in a 20-degree room at Ice King and Cold Storage in Neptune, a company that manufactures 250,000 pounds of ice daily.

One of two professional ice sculptors in New Jersey, O'Malley has come a long way since graduating from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

His first executive chef promoted him to garde manger chef (responsible for cold food, among other things) and sent him on the road to learn the art of food and ice sculpting.

"You learn by watching, and then trial and error," O'Malley said with a smile. "One of my first ice swans had such a long

neck, a co-worker thought it was an elephant."

He learned from the best at the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach and the Waldorf Astoria in New York City, which were then part of the Hilton chain.

Today, it is O'Malley who does the teaching at Hudson County Community College, where he has been a faculty member in the culinary arts department for 30 years.

The Jersey City native credits his mom, whom he called a good cook, for getting him started. He cooked for club functions as a teen, and after high school, the Culinary Institute of America beckoned.

He graduated in 1978 and has since earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the hotel-hospitality program at Fairleigh Dickinson University. O'Malley serves on the hospitality school's advisory board.

The ice carving process begins, naturally, with ice, and according to O'Malley, it has to be good ice without flaws that may cause cracks.

To begin, customers pick a design from O'Malley's website (<http://icesculpturesbykevinomalley.com>) or ask for something special that he draws or creates in a computer graphics program.

From there, O'Malley traces the design right on the ice with a die grinder before he begins the rough shaping with an electric chain saw.

"Carvings can take a few hours to several days," O'Malley said, "depending on the complexity." The sculptor works on a number of blocks at one time.

Once the rough shape is visible in the block, O'Malley moves to traditional hand sculpting tools or powered rotary

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**Kevin O'Malley sometimes creates designs using a computer graphics program for use on his ice sculptures.**

Photo courtesy of Art Petrosemolò



**Once a project is finished, getting the sculpture to the site and then displayed can be a logistical challenge, O'Malley said.**

Photo courtesy of Art Petrosemolò



Colts Neck resident Kevin O'Malley, one of two professional ice sculptors in New Jersey, works on a number of ice blocks at one time. "Carvings can take a few hours to several days, depending on the complexity," he said.

Photo courtesy of Art Petrosemolò



O'Malley said that special chisels required in his work can cost as much as \$250. The tools are hardened in order to work in the ice.

Photo courtesy of Art Petrosemol

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files with different bits. Special chisels can cost \$250.

"These tools are expensive because they are hardened to work in the ice and maintain their edge," he said.

### **The 'wow' factor**

O'Malley has to get up close and personal with each project, leaning in with his power files or working on his back with hand sculpting tools, many times covered by a fine layer of ice shavings.

*On the job with an ice sculptor.*

# 200

*The number of pounds that a finished sculpture can weigh, according to sculptor Kevin O'Malley of Colts Neck.*

"This work takes its toll," O'Malley said, "and I have carpal tunnel issues, tendonitis and back problems from the repetitive work in the cold conditions.

"It's what you'd expect spending a day in a deep freezer," he added, "which may be pleasant during a July heat wave, but not in the winter."

Completed sculptures may sit for a day or longer before they are used. The cold, dry circulating air actually polishes the surface, O'Malley said, eliminating any of the fine sculpting marks.

The "wow" factor in ice sculpture is all in the detail, "and that takes the time," O'Malley said. He works with finer and finer tools to get the detail to a point where he is satisfied.

When the work is finished, getting it to the site and displayed can be a logistical challenge. "Most times, we are talking about 200 pounds-plus, which costs several hundred dollars," O'Malley said, "and I move it with a special lift to the site and set it up for display or move it to a hotel freezer."

Today, O'Malley said, ice sculptures are amenities and not as important as they were in the 1980s. "During the recession, there was a tremendous drop in business," O'Malley said, "and only now is it beginning to come back."

He said that for events where, in the past, an ice sculpture would be front and center, customers are rethinking how they spend their money and may choose a chocolate fountain or more food instead. "You can't eat the ice," he said.

It is difficult to just make a living carving ice full time,



An ice sculpture in honor of Colts Neck resident Jacquie Lee, who took second place on the NBC television competition "The Voice."  
Photo courtesy of Art Petrosemolo

O'Malley said. Besides the high level of skill needed, the overhead alone in renting freezer space, combined with a shrinking market, makes it hard to run as a standalone business.

During O'Malley's career, his work has graced buffet tables and special events at upscale hotels and exclusive restaurants like the Pegasus Restaurant at the Meadowlands and New York's Rainbow Room.

Ice sculptures are still important for very special occasions. In mid-January, O'Malley was working on several Super Bowl ice sculptures for parties in and around the Meadowlands site.

O'Malley's Hudson County students learn the tricks of the trade and sculpt fruit, vegetables and ice. And a number have worked with him on big projects like the 40-block ice trellis with swans for the opening of a Long Island mall.

"I love the creative part," O'Malley said, pulling up his hood and putting on his gloves before heading back to work. "But it takes a toll on the body."

But, with only two professionals in the business from Cape May to North Jersey, and a clientele that appreciates his skill, expect O'Malley to be buying more gloves and hats to stay warm in the freezer before retiring anytime soon.

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# Ice Age: Long History

*The craft of ice sculpting is believed to date as far back as 600 B.C. in what's now northwestern China.*

Ice carving or sculpting has been around for just about as long as there has been ice.

It is believed that the history of ice sculpting dates as far back as 600 B.C. in what is now northwestern China.

And as early as the mid-1700s, an elaborate ice palace on the Neva River in Saint Petersburg, Russia, was built for Empress Anna Ivanovna.

Today, ice festivals abound in Europe, Asia, Japan and the northern United States.

Many of the finest ice carvers come from Japan, which prides itself on its art and culture.

The Sapporo Snow Festival, which started in 1950, is one of the largest in the world and attracts more than 2 million visitors each year.

It gained international recognition during the 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo.

In 1989, Fairbanks, Alaska began hosting the annual World Ice Art Championships, which attract some of the world's best-known ice sculptors.

Sculptures that cost hundreds of dollars and take days or weeks to finish have a relatively short life.

In temperatures of 70 degrees Fahrenheit, an ice sculpture will melt at the rate of one inch per hour.

**Art Petrosemolo**



"I love the creative part," Kevin O'Malley said of his work as an ice sculptor. "But it takes a toll on the body." He has back problems and carpal tunnel issues from the repetitive work in cold conditions.

Photo courtesy of Art Petrosemolo