



## Fire Island News

# What's a "Kenny"? Resident sculptor Kenny Goodman

By P.J.S. Dougherty  
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What's a "Kenny"?  
Resident sculptor Kenny Goodman shapes Fire Island

The year is 2067. Along the pure sands of Fire Island National Seashore, a little girl is absorbed in the timeless art of sandcastle creation. With a plastic pail and shovel she digs and sculpts, forming walls, moats and towers. Suddenly, the little girl freezes – there in her shovel, a glint of silver sparkles in the sand. She fishes out the object, and is delighted to discover it is a tiny silver surfboard inscribed with a mysterious "K". Back up the Fire Island beach the little girl sprints, to show the tiny treasure to her grandmother who sits reclining in the sun. "You've found a 'Kenny!'" the girl's grandmother exclaims, her eyes lighting up as she examines the charm. "Put it on a chain and hang it around your neck – that's a piece of Fire Island history!"

Back in 2007, the man behind the "Kenny" – artist Kenny Goodman – is humbly unaware of his legacy. Immersed in quiet intensity, Goodman sits outside his Ocean Beach jewelry shop, whittling an ornamental knife out of a piece of wood. After 35 years of creative expression, Goodman is still enthralled with the craft that launched him to prominence as one of Fire Island's most beloved artists: carving.

Despite his Fire Island notoriety, the Brooklyn-born Goodman hates the beach – sandy bathing suits, beach athletics, and bright sunlight have always been his bane. Searching for an acceptably macho alternative to beach life while occupying a Fair Harbor Fire Island rental house, Goodman purchased gouges and a mallet and chopped out his seminal wood sculpture, "Snaggletooth." The massive, curiously disquieting wooden head sculpture launched Goodman's career as an artist – though artistic acclaim was hardly his intent. "I have no art background, I didn't study art, didn't draw, paint . . . nothing," Goodman explains. "I have no background in anything except being nice."

Soon after Snaggletooth, Goodman's productivity exploded as he became increasingly wrapped up in his craft. In the daytime, Goodman carved large wooden heads in the open, frequently attracting Fire Island crowds that marveled at his skill. In the evening,

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Goodman moved on to carving smaller faces out of chalk and crayons; as a teacher, he had plenty of access to these materials. Through carving, Goodman discovered himself: “I’m a terrible competitor,” he admits. “But as I began to carve, I found a niche at being OK at something. I’m not a great speller, not a great dancer . . . but I can carve. I began to feel a balance in myself.”

Bolstered by his local popularity, Goodman launched his first shop out of his house in Fire Island’s Fair Harbor, and eventually moved to Ocean Beach to run his “one-man-band” art business. Goodman’s shop is a stone’s throw from the Ocean Beach Fire Island ferry; simply hang a right after disembarking. “You can’t miss it,” Goodman will say – and he’s correct. A unique piece of Fire Island real estate, Goodman’s Ocean Beach storefront yard is adorned with a hodgepodge of bric-a-brac; old boots, pots, vintage signs, rusty tools, watering cans, and carvings. The eclectic motif continues inside with carved wooden heads, old western memorabilia, pocketknives, and a display of the book *The Little Prince*. Of course, the fascinating shop is also teeming with “Kennys.”

What’s a Kenny?

A Kenny is a piece of art or jewelry made from Goodman’s carvings. Though his art takes many forms in silver and wood, themes resonate throughout his body of work: surfboards, the human form, aquatic life, castles, hearts, and most significantly, faces. These faces are Goodman’s “characters,” projecting personalities that are haunting, comical, mysterious and wise. In his wood faces carved out of logs, youthful facial features are juxtaposed with long beards of age, creating majestic illusions. In Goodman’s tiny silver visages, features allude to demons, fairies, rabbis, jesters, seers and sultans.

A Kenny’s true essence transcends the tangible. A Kenny is the offering a young boy bashfully presents to his first-ever crush; a token of a coming-of-age summer spent on Fire Island beaches. A Kenny silver surfboard can be found on a broad chest of a 35-year-old Cherry Grove lifeguard or hanging around the neck of a 13-year-old boy from Kismet who just got his first short board. Two newly acquainted girls ride their bicycles from Ocean Bay Park to Goodman’s Ocean Beach shop, where they purchase identical heart-clasp ankle bracelets. The Kennys they share come to symbolize the Fire Island beach summer that made them lifelong best friends. A father who bought his first Kenny 25 years ago now brings his son to Goodman’s Ocean Beach shop to complete the cycle. A teenage girl wears a silver necklace adorned with ten Kennys – one for each summer she has spent on Fire Island.

A Kenny is a charm; a magical artifact imbued with the soul of an artist and the spirit of Fire Island beaches. “They turn into a souvenir, a way to identify one Fire Island person from another,” Goodman explains. Most of all, a Kenny is an experience that is wholly and inseparably connected to the Fire Island community.

The Kenny Experience

“Are you the famous Kenny Goodman?” A Fire Island rental tenant asks, removing her sunglasses to get a good look at Goodman’s wares for the first time. A long-time fan appears in his shop’s doorway, broadly grinning and holding aloft an old cast iron-pan – an offering for Goodman’s front-yard “Pot Garden” of rusted cookware. A little girl named Olivia proudly shows off three Kennys on her necklace; a starfish, a surfboard, and a “kastle.”

A young boy shyly enters the store with his mother, and after an agonizing inner debate, selects a Kenny as a birthday present for a special friend. Goodman engages the child. “You know why you just picked out the perfect present? Because you chose it all by yourself.” He shows the boy how to tie the cord necklace, measures it out on his neck, and gift-wraps the piece, sending the smiling boy on his way.

After 25 years as a special education teacher, Goodman is attuned to behaviors, especially those of children. He immediately identifies why the boy’s decision was so

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challenging. “That gift was for a little girl; he has a deep crush on her . . . you just know by the way he’s looking that he’s buying it for someone important,” Goodman says. “That little boy will be a customer for the rest of my days.” Given Goodman’s popularity with Fire Island kids, many more will be returning to visit his shop every summer – both to add to their Kenny collections and to absorb the wisdom of the artist behind them.

“My whole approach is, how do you get to be the best person you can be?” Goodman says. “I’m interested in encouraging you.” Such benevolent support is woven into the experience that makes a Kenny much greater than the sum of its art.

Though Goodman will demur at the suggestion that he is a famous artist, he grudgingly acknowledges the importance of his work in the tapestry of Fire Island beach culture. “A Kenny is not just a piece of jewelry,” he muses. “It’s really significant to Fire Island locals, more significant than I ever could have planned for it to be.”

Equally significant is Goodman the person; now a well-established Fire Island and Ocean Beach icon. When not helping customers, he can often be found outside his shop, chopping away at a log to reveal the face within, whittling away at a promising hunk of Fire Island scavenged wood, or immersed in carving a tiny charm out of chalk or crayon. An image of contentment, balance, and positive energy, Goodman exemplifies the relaxed, mellow state of mind that Fire Island imparts on even the most harried visitor.

For Goodman, despite his disdain for the beach, Fire Island’s natural beauty has served as a source for tremendous artistic inspiration. “It’s a great place to be creative,” Goodman explains. “Fire Island turned out to be this spectacular environment to just be who I was. I walked around and I saw sticks that I turned into art, pieces of wood that I could see things in . . . it allowed me to be creative, in the way that I wanted to be creative.”

As the Fire Island environment inspired him to create, the Fire Island community embraced him and gave Goodman the welcoming home he needed to thrive. “They were looking for someone to like, I was looking for someone to like me,” he shrugs. Like a crucial puzzle piece, Goodman fit perfectly into Fire Island’s culture, and completed its vibrant scene with art, character, and creativity.

“Who are is who you shape yourself to be,” Goodman concludes. “For me, being nice – kindness – just worked out.”

For more on Kenny Goodman, visit [www.kennygoodman.com](http://www.kennygoodman.com). Even better, visit Kenny Goodman’s Ocean Beach, Fire Island, shop at 325 Denhoff Walk or give him a call at 888.898.6789.

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