

# How to Build Professional Looking Tombstones That Light Up

BY MARK LEBIODA

**T**ombstones are a strategic element in any graveyard? This article will not only show you how to build great looking tombstones out of rigid foam but ones that light up as well! Since this project deals with electricity, please be very careful! We will be creating an older and newer looking tombstone from the same basic shape. Hot Wire Foam Factory (HWFF) (<http://www.hotwirefoamfactory.com>) manufactures the tools used in this article. These tools are great for shaping the foam to easily create professional looking tombstones.

For this application, we use beaded EPS (expanded polystyrene) foam, which can be found in the insulation departments at home improvement centers in 4' by 8' sheets. The front and back of the tombstones are made from 3/4" thick EPS foam and 1 1/2" is used for the sides of the tombstone. Outdoor latex paint is used to coat the tombstones rather than an aerosol paint which will eat away at the EPS foam. The foam can also be hard-coated with Foamcoat, but these tombstones are placed out of reach so they will last indefinitely with a good paint job.

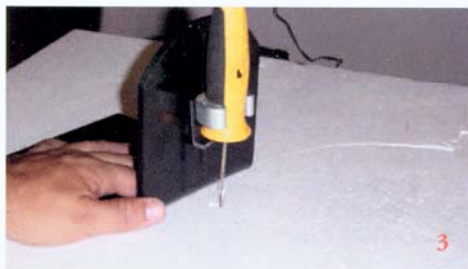
Start by cutting the initial size of the tombstone. The stones in my examples are 26" wide by 32" tall. Mark the 26" at both ends of the foam, and position the 4' Bow Cutter on the markings. Once in position, turn on the switch and let the Bow Cutter cut through the foam. In seconds you have cut out your tombstone. You will need to cut a piece for both the front and the back. **1**



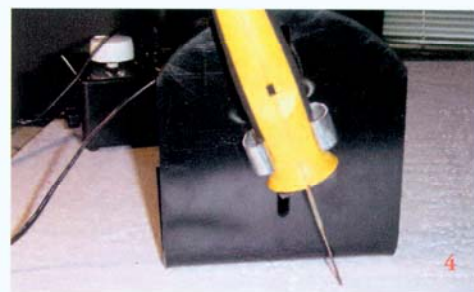
Create a template using a publisher package and tape the template to the foam. Punch small holes along the lines "marking" the foam. **2**



Place two pieces of the 3/4" foam together and use the Hot Knife attached to the Sled Guide to carve out the top of the tombstone. The Sled Guide allows you to cut a consistent line between the two pieces. **3**



Set the back piece aside for now, and start cutting out the letters and images that you marked on the front piece of foam. Angle the Hot Knife so that the back of the cut is larger than the front. This allows more light to shine through smaller sections. **4**

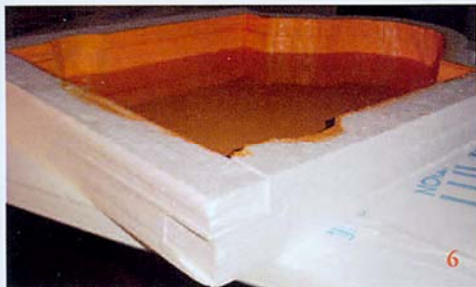


Start aging the stone by adding cracks to the face using the Engraving Tool. This tool is just the right size for cracks as only the tip is heated. Most cracks split top down. The more cracks you add, the older the stone looks. **5**



You now need 2 1/2" wide pieces of the 1 1/2" thick foam. Cutting these pieces is quick and easy using the Bow Tool. Stack two pieces on top of each other forming 3" by 2 1/2" pieces of foam. This makes the sidewalls 3" thick so that when the lights are later installed, they do not touch the front of the stone. Glue these pieces with the 2 1/2" side down, to the back section of the tombstone using HWFF's spray adhesive. This is an excellent adhesive! Not only does it form a quick and strong bond, but it allows you to easily carve through glued sections. You can see by the picture how the pieces form the sides of the stone. You will also notice sections that had to be trimmed a little so they will not be seen through the cutouts. **6 7 8**

It's a good idea to paint the inside using the same color as the lights that will be inserted inside. Paint the inside of the front piece and the sides of the cutouts. You can see in the picture how the cutouts are wider on the inside to allow for more light. Do not worry about getting paint on the front, since this will soon be covered. **6 7 8**



Test place the front onto the back section making sure you do not see any of the sidewall through the cutouts. Once satisfied, glue the front to the walls.

Do not worry about placing the piece exactly in position since you will be trimming the sides.

For the old stone, you will want a curved side.

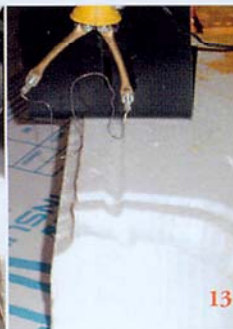
Shape the Freehand Router to the curve you desire and cut along the sides. You now have a nice uniform side in one easy motion! **9**



**10** Now, notch out pieces using the Sculpting Tool. Again, the more notches the older the stone. **11**



To make smooth sides for the new stone use HWFF's Pro Knife with the Sled Guide to smooth out the sides. Next, form the wire on the Freehand Router to not only curve the sides a little, but to also add another pattern to the face of the stone. This tool allows you to create two patterns with one pass on the stone. **12 13**



To create the base cut two pieces; one out of the 1 1/2" foam that is 2" larger than the tombstone, and the other piece out of the 3/4" foam that is 1" larger than the tombstone. Run the Sculpting Tool along the edges giving it more of a stone look. Trace the tombstone on top of the 3/4" piece and cut that section out using the Hot Knife. These two pieces are glued together and the stone will sit inside the 3/4" piece. **14 15**



Glue the stone into the base, and then start the painting process. First paint all the cracks and indents using a flat black latex paint. This provides more depth once the stone is completed. **16**



Then seal the stone using a color close to the stone's final color. **17** Before the paint completely dries, spray on stone paint, which can be found at any craft shop. The stone paint will adhere a little better if the base coat is still a little tacky, and since the base coat is basically the same color, you will not have to use as much stone spray paint. In the

example I went over the older stone with a black stone spray paint to add more age to the stone. **18**



For the final process, which brings out the stone characteristics, dry brush the cracks, sides, indents and letters with a flat white latex paint. Do not however dry brush all the edges on the letters, just the

bottom edges. This provides more depth to the letters. Dry brushing is a technique where you dip a small brush into paint, rub as much off as you can on a paper towel and then wipe the brush along the edges. You do not need a lot of paint on the brush to get the effect you need. You may also wish to dry brush on the face of the stone under the cracks and letters to simulate water run off.

**19 20 21**



The two tombstones, while starting out with the same basic shape, look completely different. This is all based on the finishing techniques you use.

Now it's time to add the lights! I used old strings of C7 Christmas lights. Determine the placement of the lights by pushing toothpicks through the back. You do not want to see the light through the cutout, so this helps with the placement. Next, take the Hot Knife and cut out small holes that will fit the lights. Place the lights into

the holes and toothpick down the wires to keep them in place. Glue the wire into place using a low temperature hot glue gun. Once the glue is dry remove the toothpicks. **22 23**



You will also notice in the previous pictures, that a piece of PVC is glued to the stone. Route out a section for the pipe to sit in, providing more

gluing surface. You can then shove a piece of wooden doweling into your lawn, and slide the tombstone over the doweling to keep the stone in place.

Here are the pictures of the stones when lit! They look very impressive at night and you do not have to worry about spotlights lighting up your yard! **24 25**



So as you can see, with a little more effort, you can create realistic looking tombstones that will wow your patrons or the neighborhood!

Every year Mark Lebioda and his family create a 700 square foot haunt, which is attached to their garage. They charge canned goods for admission, which are then given to a local food bank. Their WEB site [www.mourningcemetery.com](http://www.mourningcemetery.com) has other projects including a tombstone that bleeds!!



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