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Barre benefactor's sculpture legacy grows



Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff Photo

Sculptor Sean Williams, of Barre, stands with a model of a roughly 7-foot-tall granite sculpture he will be creating with money from the Semprebon Fund.

BARRE — Two granite gargoyles will soon resume their relentless tug-of-war in downtown Barre, and before the summer is over an oversized jack-in-the-box will settle in on its side by the Aldrich Public Library.

The Stone Sculpture Legacy Program, underwritten with some of the money that Barre businessman Charlie Semprebon left the city at his death in 2009, has turned into the gift that keeps on giving, one gray granite work of art at a time.

Three pieces — the gargoyles bike rack included — already have been unveiled. Two more — both sculptural bike racks — will be over the summer months.

Sue Higby, the local resident who secured \$103,000 in Semprebon funds for various aspects of the sculpture project that she coordinates in her spare time, says more public art is on the way.

Higby says a sixth piece is already in the works and two more — by Gampo Wickenheiser and local artist Sean Williams — have just been commissioned.

Higby, who spends her days and some of her nights as executive director of Studio Place Arts, is

pretty pleased with the project that has allowed art to spill out of SPA's North Main Street galleries and into the city's historic downtown.

"This is a really wonderful way to expose people in our community and beyond our community to the incredibly rich talent pool that is here in our area," she said.

Higby said Wickenheiser will soon begin work on what will be Barre's fourth sculptural bike rack. This one will feature a carved granite fish head and fish tail connected by a serpentine section of metal that he plans to tinker with so it resembles the bones of a fish.

The result will be a fully functional bike rack, according to Wickenheiser, who says the space between the classical fish head and tail he plans to carve "will be a play on how empty or full a fish could be."

If Higby has selected a location for Wickenheiser's bike rack, which won't be rolled out until next year, she isn't saying. However, it will be downtown, like the gargoyle rack, carved by Chris Miller, and Giuliano Cecchinelli II's tipped-over jack-in-the-box that will live on the side lawn of the library over the summer.

The other bike rack, unveiled when the weather gets warmer, is the only one that won't be downtown. In a nod to Semprebon, Heather Ritchie's whimsical piece — depicting a child riding a Big Wheel jumping from one granite ramp to another — will be placed at Charlie's Playground 2012, one of several playground projects financed by Semprebon's generous bequest.

Ritchie supplied the first installment in the Stone Sculpture Legacy Program with a more serious piece titled "Coffee Break." A nod to Barre's industrial heritage, it features four rough-cut blocks of Barre Gray granite with life-sized tools of the trade, a coffee cup and a lunch pail carved on the top, creating the pocket park just to the left of the main entrance to Barre City Place.

Williams' newly commissioned sculpture, "Culmination," will be a bit of an architectural nod to Barre's ethnic diversity.

According to Higby, the tall granite sculpture will feature "a cluster of architectural elements emerging from a large mountainous base, implying the silhouette of a small multicultural city." The architectural aspects of the buildings in Williams' stone city will be borrowed from around the world, alluding to Barre's well-known reputation as a melting pot.

The sculpture, which will stand roughly 7 feet, will combine rough and natural forms and refined geometric shapes that Williams hopes will command closer inspection.

"It is intended to pull people in to view the piece closer and closer," he said. "It will get people to think of our diverse community in terms of the 'micro' and 'macro' aspects."

Both Wickenheiser and Williams work at Barre Sculpture Studios, and their pieces — like the others commissioned through the Semprebon-funded program — were chosen by a panel of art experts Higby assembled.

The new pieces are expected to be finished next fall, though Cecchinelli is working on a second sculpture, “Velocé,” that should be ready before then. The freestanding sculpture with the Italian name that means “fast” will depict a cyclist in motion. The piece is another nod to Semprebon — an avid cyclist who separately left \$1 million to help finance the construction of a bike path linking Barre and Barre Town.

Only one of the pieces is indoors. Cecchinelli’s father, Giuliano Cecchinelli Sr., carved a 4-foot-tall statue of Sir Isaac Barre that he personally delivered to City Hall last summer. The intricate, three-quarter-sized likeness of the man for whom Barre was named after a storied fistfight in 1793 has been there ever since.

Higby didn’t say whether the latest commissions will be the last, but she did hint that the money has been largely committed.

“We’re coming down to the final drops,” she said, suggesting it is possible another benefactor will be found.

“That would be wonderful,” she said.

Even if that doesn’t happen, Higby said the work makes a powerful statement about Barre by creating head-turning accents the community can be proud of.

“Sculpture makes places grand,” she said, suggesting the area outside the Barre Municipal Auditorium might make a good home for one of the unfinished pieces.

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