Jerry Gorum at work on Lincoln sculpture for Springfield, Ill.

Gorum’s decision to leave finance pays dividends

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You might say Jerry Gorum was forced to become an artist. It all began when he was in the first grade in Glenmora, La.

“We had a school assignment to draw a picture. My older brothers had taught me to trace, so I traced my picture instead of drawing it. My teacher suspected what I’d done, so she gave me a box of colored chalk and told me to re-create the drawing on the chalkboard.”

Gorum shakes his head remembering the pressure he felt. “I knew the teacher would punish me if I couldn’t convince her that I’d drawn that picture. And I knew I’d get another whipping when I got home, so I was highly motivated to do a good job.”

“I guess I did, because when I got finished, she left it on the board for several days and showed it to the other teachers. When I heard all those teachers brag on my drawing, I decided right then I wanted to be an artist.”

From then on, Gorum drew on “school papers, brown paper sacks, textbooks, boards—whatever I could get my hands on. I got a lot of whippings for it, but I kept on doing it.”

After high school Gorum enrolled in college as an art and advertising major, but dropped out after two years because he still hadn’t had an art lesson.

By then, Gorum had a wife and child, so he spent the next 27 years at various jobs, mostly in finance and banking. He was a financial manager for General Electric, then became president of Allen State Bank. He later was the major stockholder in the Allen Investment Corp., and served as its president until he sold it in 1985.

Gorum is a man for all seasons. As a teenager, he tried rodeoing (“You won’t find me in the Cowboy Hall of Fame”). Later, he earned an instructor’s certificate in scuba diving. In addition, he’s piloted a private plane and served on the Glenmora City Council.

In his spare time, Gorum studied art and sculpture and experimented with various art forms, including watercolors and acrylics.

“I was kind of forced into sculpture because I never had art lessons, so I’m not very good at color,” Gorum says. “I tell people if you can be happy doing anything else besides art, do it. This is a tough business.”

In his case, although a successful businessman, his greatest satisfaction came from creating sculptures. He sold several small pieces to private art collectors, and each sale fueled his desire to switch careers.

Gorum’s work recently earned him a commission for a life-size monument of President Abraham Lincoln. The national monument was dedicated in Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, Ill., on June 16.

“I believe this is the first national monument made in Louisiana,” Gorum says with obvious pride, then quips, “I know it’s the first one done in Glenmora.”

The statue is modeled on a woodcarving by John Frank, a noted Lincoln scholar. The monument depicts Lincoln leaning against a rail fence, hat in hand. It was unveiled in conjunction with the re-dedication of the national park in Springfield. Although Congress passed legislation to finance the reconstruction of Lincoln’s home, the monument has been financed through contributions from private citizens throughout the United States.

Inside his studio, the only light comes from six flood lights dangling from electrical wires. Gorum’s been too busy to install the ceiling tile stacked in a corner. Fools are mounted nearly on a pegboard on one wall. Nearby is a hot plate and a large pot for melting wax. An anatomy book stands open for handy reference.

Even though he has nearly perfected his lost-wax technique, he says, “I still experiment and learning.”

As he speaks, he cuts and shapes a short cylinder of wire mesh. “I had trouble with the coil of the Lincoln piece. It’s heavy with wax, and nothing I tried would hold the weight and yet look right. Finally, I got the idea of using this wire mesh as a base. It worked so well that I’m using it as the base for Lincoln’s top hat.”

Gorum is a stickler for getting the details right on his sculptures of historical figures.

“When I did the statue of St. Maximilian Kolbe in Houston, I made sure I got the bone and muscle structure right in the feet. The monument was mounted on a raised platform, and the feet were visible. I didn’t want a podiatrist to discover a mistake in the anatomy. I would have spoiled his enjoyment of the statue.”

Gorum is especially proud of the Motherhood Monument he designed for the city of Pineville. The statue is of a mother sitting in a rocking chair. She holds a Bible in her right hand, her other arm cradles a little girl holding a doll. A barefoot boy in overalls is at her knee.

Glenmora is obviously proud of its resident artist. Gorum’s easy-going manner encourages visitors, including school children, to stop by when he’s working.

“I wish I had the opportunity to see and talk with an artist when I was growing up. It would have meant so much to me,” Gorum reflects.

His next projects will be an eagle raising an American flag, for the Veterans Administration Hospital in Pineville and a colossal sculpture for the Passion Play in Monroe.