Hammering his mark on Baton Rouge and beyond

By KEITH LAWRENCE
Advocate staff

Sculptor Frank Hayden works in a small garage. The garage has a low ceiling and a sloped floor. It is a poor substitute for the studio that Hayden wishes he owned.

"It's not what I dreamed of," he says, "but I think my circumstances are the common lot for most artists." Despite his limited space, Hayden continues to hammer out internationally acclaimed works.

But then the 53-year-old Hayden always has had a knack for making the best of his situation.

Reared by his mother in a Memphis housing project, Hayden spent most of his time as a youth at the Roman Catholic school he attended a few blocks from his home. It was there that the priests and nuns instilled in him a strong work ethic.

"If they needed a science building, they would go out and build one. They got the students to carry the bricks and boards," recalls Hayden, who as a youngster would rise at 3 a.m. to deliver newspapers.

Hayden learned another important lesson in school — "the special sense of love and fellowship that is the initial understanding of what Catholicism was and is."

That lesson was impressed upon him as he watched the nuns sneak food out of the school and hand it to blind people who waited outside.

Hayden never received any formal art training in high school, but he did show promise. A poster he designed won a citywide contest, and he remembers being more interested in building a model of the respiratory system than learning how the respiratory system works.

An avid reader and a good student, Hayden received an academic scholarship to Xavier University in New Orleans. It was there he was introduced to sculpting.

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One of Hayden's art teachers at Xavier was Sister Lurana Neely, who well remembers her student.

"He worked very, very hard, after school, weekends, before school," Neely says. "He also had an intellectual curiosity, a desire to get to the root of things philosophically."

Hayden's time at Xavier was split between his studies and a part-time job. He did so well in school that he was offered scholarships to 10 graduate programs. He selected Notre Dame University because he wanted to study under noted sculptor Ivan Mestrovic.

"We were working in the presence of a genius," Hayden says of Mestrovic. "We were all shaped by his skills and sensitivity."

After graduation, Hayden received a Fulbright Scholarship and studied at the Munich Academy in Germany. Later, he and his wife, Joyce, traveled to Denmark and Sweden, where Hayden continued his studies.

But most of his time has been spent in Louisiana, where he and Joyce have reared their four children. All four now attend Southern University, where Hayden is an art teacher.

Much of Hayden's work is based on deeply held convictions about fellowship, family, Christian values and war.

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"Frank is a creative genius who is easy to work with. Many are not.

John Bartolomeo, a Chicago architect, says Hayden understands how to make art works fit the settings where they will be displayed.

"Frank has that discipline," says Bartolomeo, who first commissioned Hayden while the sculptor was in college.

"Frank makes a statement with his art, which is what a lot of artists don't do," Bartolomeo says. "Plus he happens to be a nice guy."

Hayden can be stubborn if the cause is right.

Once, he rejected a $5,000 commission at a time when he needed the money — because the people who wanted to hire him also wanted to tamper with his concept.

Hayden is not a competitive man. He enjoys watching football, but does not root for either side. He is driven, however, and rarely satisfied with his finished product.

"Sometimes you have to bring a piece to completion to know it shouldn't be there. But never am I worried that the water is a little bit too deep" to try something new, he says.

Early in his career, Hayden heard

someone say that commercial artists including sculptors — lose an edge or their point of view after six or seven years of work. To date, that has not been a problem for him.

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