

They Are the Champions

BY WANDA HENNIG

MARIO CHIDO, WHEN PRESSED, CAN COME UP WITH SEVERAL DEFINING EVENTS THAT LED HIM TO WHERE HE IS NOW—creating *Remember Them: Champions for Humanity*, a grand contemporary work of art that will put a definitive “there” in Oakland, bring tourists, inspire and educate children and place the city on the international cultural and human rights map. The massive four-part sculpture will depict 25 culturally diverse global heroes—think Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, to name but two—who have made a difference during the past 150 years.

Chido says he first realized he had some “peculiar talent” when he was “12 or 13” and was sent to a short-lived, experimental arts-focused school run by the city. “I hadn’t done well at regular school but took to this like a fish to water,” he says. Around the same time he saw an artist sculpting a head of President Lincoln on PBS. “I remember having an unbelievable desire to sculpt. The first time someone put a block of clay in front of me, I thought, ‘This is what I’m going to do—something art- and sculpture-based.’” ▶▶

►► Champions

He built a successful and lucrative career creating Halloween masks—a business he has since sold—and designing and executing exotic projects for casinos and other entertainment venues. Not surprisingly, but in striking contrast to his *Champions* project, the rooms and passageways in his Peralta Street warehouse studio are rich with attention-grabbing artifacts, such as a larger-than-life Egyptian mummy in the front office that is, in fact, a bar.

Chiodo leads me to a room where I am awestruck by a perfectly proportioned, finely detailed model of the project. It depicts the seven continents and shows the 25 people he is including in the 50-foot-long, 21-foot-tall, four-part work that he is creating in another room. When completed, this monumental sculpture, with its Mount Rushmore-esque presence—the actualization of Chiodo’s longtime desire to bring people together and make a difference—will be cast in bronze and given a permanent home in a city park near the Fox Theater.

Chiodo sees each of his 25 champions as a role model who changed the world for the better through a combination of strength, courage, integrity and compassion. Some, like Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, Helen Keller and Mother Teresa, are well-known; others like Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, Iranian Nobel Peace Prize-winner Shirin Ebadi and Oskar Schindler, the namesake of Steven Spielberg’s Holocaust film *Schindler’s List*, are not exactly household names.

One event that triggered the project, Chiodo says, took place at the Oakland Airport more than 20 years ago. He was standing in the gift store, paging through a book of Maya Angelou quotes. One, in particular, struck him: “Only equals can be friends.”

“I remember walking out the door,” he recalls, “and at that moment two men, one black and one white, collided with each other.” In a flash, racial slurs were flying. “I remember thinking, I have to do something to bring people together.”

Each person in his sculpture—for which he is donating his time to the city—made exactly that kind of difference. With this work, Chiodo joins their ranks.

See more about Mario Chiodo’s project at www.remember-them.org.