

# Oakland to honor 25 leaders in huge sculpture

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Helen Keller is one of the figures in Oakland artist Mario Chiodo's "Remember Them" monument which he has been working on since Sept. 11 2001 and hopes will inspire schoolchildren.

Credit: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

Oakland's version of Mount Rushmore will rise this year in an Uptown park: a towering, ponderous monument to great leaders that organizers hope will inspire schoolchildren and awe tourists.

The \$7 million monument, "Remember Them," features 25 famous people who fought for peace or human rights. They're an unlikely crew, ranging from Winston Churchill to Malcolm X to Harvey Milk to Mother Teresa, soon to be joined in eternity.

The monument, to be installed in a park next to the Fox Theater, will be one of the largest bronze sculptures in the United States. It will be three stories tall, weigh about 25 tons and span 90 feet - a third the length of a football field.

"People don't usually pay attention to public artwork. But the artwork that people get excited about - it's big," said Oakland artist Mario Chiodo, 48, who until now was best known for his horror masks and Las Vegas sculptures. "If I had my way, it would have 300 people. But you've got to start someplace."

The first piece of "Remember Them" will be installed this month. It features Maya Angelou and Ruby Bridges, the Louisiana girl who, in 1960, was the first African American student at an all-white elementary school in New Orleans. The rest of the monument will be installed by the end of the year, if Chiodo can raise about \$4 million needed to finish the project.

The monument is likely to be a popular field trip destination for East Bay schoolchildren, thanks to a high school curriculum created by the King Institute at Stanford. The curriculum focuses on the 25 figures in the sculpture, their work and historical impact.

Angelou, along with Bill Clinton and Martin Luther King Jr.'s son, are among the project's ardent supporters.

"This is important because people my age want to know that all the things we've lived through have not been for naught," she said in a documentary about the project.

The project is funded mostly through private donations, including a \$1 million gift from Kaiser Permanente. The city last month gave Chiodo a grant for \$182,000, which some residents protested in light of the city's budget deficit.

The council approved the grant unanimously, in part because the fabrication and installation will create jobs for Oakland artisans and the monument is likely to draw thousands of visitors to the revitalized Uptown neighborhood.

The project's potential as a tourist attraction is not lost on the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, which is handling the project fundraising.

"This will be a centerpiece in Oakland, to help people understand the struggles of humanity," said chamber President Joe Haraburda, who helped Chiodo conceive and develop the project. "Being among the most diverse cities in America, Oakland is the perfect place for this."

Chiodo got the idea after 9/11, he said. Until then, he had created sculptures for Las Vegas casinos, the Oakland Zoo, Fairyland and other commercial enterprises around the country. But after the terrorist attacks, he said, he wanted to do something for peace.

He chose the figures to represent as many cultures as possible, in hopes that children, especially, will see leaders they can identify but also discover new role models, he said.

"You don't have to like or agree with everyone here, but hopefully you'll find someone you can relate to and learn about someone you didn't know," said Chiodo, who's donating his time for the project.

"Remember Them" is in five pieces, including a miniature version of the entire project for blind visitors to feel. The monument includes quotes from each of the 25 figures.

Leon Leyson made the trek from Fullerton to Chiodo's West Oakland studio to glimpse the clay model of "Remember Them." When he saw the likeness of Oskar Schindler, he was transported back to 1940s Czechoslovakia, where he was among the 1,200 Jews saved from the Nazis by working in Schindler's factory.

"It really does show the emotion of Schindler, with his arms outstretched," Leyson said Thursday. "It's important to remember that Schindler and these other people did the right thing when the law of the land was entirely different. What Schindler did was an enormous gamble."

"Remember Them" is the only statue of Schindler in the United States, Chiodo believes.

"It's a landmark," Leyson said. "It's a singular thing to be depicted in a statue. It's permanent. It means his message really is, as they say, set in stone."