

NSU sculptor making bid to create Nevada statue

By Elissa Grossell
American News Writer

There's always a crowd at Northern State University's art studio when Ben Victor's around.

Surrounded by human figures of all shapes and sizes, you'd think Victor, 24, was having a party. But a double take shows you that these guests aren't actually real.

They are the sculptor's very lifelike creations — and they're getting him noticed across the country.

In fact, Victor's latest achievement — a 3-foot-tall clay mockette of Sarah Winnemucca — is taking him to Nevada. One of four finalists in a competition to create a bronze sculpture of the Nevada Indian activist, Victor is in the Silver State for a chance to build a larger statue of her to be placed in the U.S. Capitol.

Winnemucca, who was born in 1844 and died in 1891 of tuberculosis, was the daughter and granddaughter of Paiute chiefs. She wrote extensively about the federal government's treatment of Indians.

Each state is allowed two statues in the Capitol's National Statuary Hall. Nevada has only one, of the late U.S. Sen. Patrick McCarran. In 2001, the Nevada Legislature passed a bill designating Winnemucca for the state's second statue. The Nevada Women's History Project has raised \$150,000 for the project.

Those funds go toward the artist chosen to create the final bronze figure, which will stand somewhere between 7 and 9 feet in height. But the money also pays for the small-scale versions and travel expenses for the four finalists — Victor, of Aberdeen; Sara Sweetwater of Elko, Nev.; Ed Dwight of Denver; and Gareth Curtiss of Olympia, Wash.



American News Photo by Dawn Dietrich

Work in progress: Northern State University Senior Ben Victor works on the hair of his sculpture of Nevada Indian Activist Sarah Winnemucca Friday in the sculpture studio at NSU in Aberdeen.

Victor's mini-Sarah represents what he would create should he be declared the winner.

"It's not only a sculpture but it's a historical piece of artwork," he said.

He's done his homework. He started the sculpture two months ago but started research before that — reading books about Winnemucca, including her own "Life

Among the Pauites," which was published in 1853.

His elaborate sculpture is of a proud princess, her long hair and fringed dress blowing behind her. The details are amazingly intricate, including miniature clay stringed beads on her dress and about 4,000 tiny holes poked in the skirt to represent burlap fabric.

Victor said he wanted to get her in motion, because she was

a tireless peace activist and human rights advocate. Also, the wind symbolizes that she created change.

Winnemucca is holding up a Mexican shellflower. Shellflower is not only her Paiute name, it's also a metaphor, Victor said. The flower stands for peace and oneness with nature.

"I just wanted to capture her character," Victor said. "She was real active in her cause."

But he also incorporated a look of compassion on her face.

"I tried to capture not only that determination but also her kindness," Victor said.

Finally, he wanted to give Winnemucca a sense of rest, that she's accomplished her cause, drawing from something she once said about death: "I shall be in the sweet rest of peace, I the chieftain's weary daughter."

Victor has spent up to 12 hours a day in his NSU studio working on Sarah, and he laughs and admits his family — wife Julie, 2-year-old son Caleb and new 4-month-old daughter Audrey Lynn — would like to see him once in a while, too.

Now that he's finished, Victor was understandably a little apprehensive about transporting his fragile clay princess all the way to Nevada for his presentation Wednesday. So he added a special base and backing to the figure with soft foam against the surface.

He's not sure how long it'll take for the selection committee — made up of state and art officials — to choose a winner.

While Victor may breathe a sigh of relief once Sarah's safely in Nevada, his work is by no means done.

He's got other projects going on — including a statue
See STATUE, Page 9A

Statue: More work ahead

Continued from Page 5A

of the Biblical character Delilah to complement a 6-foot 6-inch sculpture of Samson he's getting bronzed thanks to an anonymous donor from Michigan. There are also relief sculptures — in which a form projects from a background — of famous Aberdonians Clark Swisher and Bob Wachs that will be placed at Swisher Field and Wachs Arena, respectively. The NSU Wolves Club commissioned Victor to create these.

"Oh yeah, I'm busy," Victor said, laughing.

He's got other ideas floating around in his head, too, though he doesn't know when he'll get around to them.

The full-time NSU art student will graduate in May and is considering graduate school studies at the

University of South Dakota.

Victor admits he's getting more exposure than he ever imagined. It's been that way since his Victory Soldier made its debut at Aberdeen Regional Airport. The 7 1/2-foot bronze statue — the first of three the city of Aberdeen commissioned Victor to sculpt for the airport's War Memorial project — was unveiled at the Veterans Day grand opening of the new terminal.

Victor says the airport has raised more than \$52,000 for the second soldier statue. Another \$10,000 and he can begin.

It seems there's no rest for the weary.

With a smile, Victor says, "I'll be real busy next year."

Reporter Elissa Grossell (605) 622-2301 or 1-800-925-4100 ext. 301; egrossell@aberdeennews.com.