

# Artist's work stands tall at U.S. Capitol

He went to the Dakotas to work out unfulfilled aspirations in basketball, of all things.

Then, almost on a whim, Bakersfield's Benjamin Victor signed up for a college sculpture class. He'd always been pretty good at sketching and he had a good feel for human anatomy. So, why not? It was three units.

Now, three years later, Ben Victor has decided to make a go of it, to see where this sculpting thing takes him.

Maybe the realization that sculpting was a realistic career choice hit him when he saw the "A" on his college report card after that first semester.

More likely, it hit him on March 9, as he was standing in the U.S. Capitol rotunda, news photographers jostling for space at his feet.

Someone whisked the drape away and, to resounding cheers, there stood Victor's 9-foot-tall masterpiece, the 19th-century Native-American princess Sarah Win-nemucca. Her bronze image had just become the newest addition to the National Statuary Hall Collection in Washington, D.C. And Ben Victor, the youngest artist to ever achieve such acclaim, had just joined her.

The honor puts Victor, just 26, in the company of sculpting luminaries such as Gutzon Borglum, who carved those four presidential faces into Mount Rushmore, and Daniel Chester French, who created the Lincoln Monument.

No bad for a Bakersfield kid who was pondering a career as a textbook illustrator, among other possibilities, a few years ago.

Victor, a 1997 Foothill High School grad, took two years off from school after receiving his diploma. Then, convinced he still had a little competitive basketball left in him, he moved to Ellendale, N.D., and enrolled in tiny Trinity Bible College along with three other Bakersfield athletes. He played small-college basketball there for two years, then transferred to Northern State University in Aberdeen, S.D.

At the time, that path might have seemed like a mix of indecisiveness and wanderlust. Victor calls it circuitous destiny.

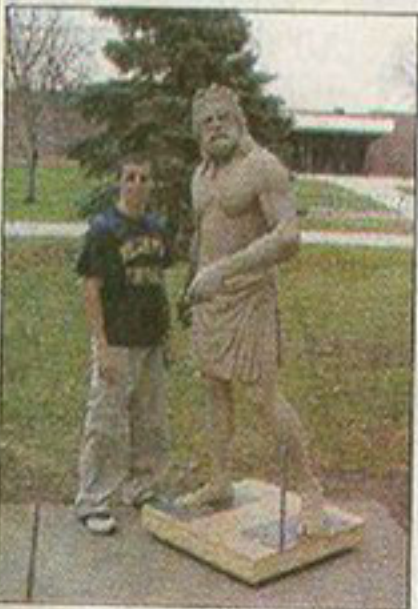
"I was destined to be an artist," Victor said, "and I was running away from my destiny being a (college basketball) point guard."

Victor had taken a few art classes at Trinity and he stayed with that area of study at Northern State. In his second semester there, he tried his hand at sculpture.

"That felt natural to me," Victor said. "I felt like I had no limitations. It was an odd feeling, like I had found my medium."

The following semester he took on a project of remarkable ambition: a life-size rendering of the Biblical strongman Samson. As the Samson sculpture took shape, the

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COURTESY OF BEN VICTOR

**Ben Victor poses with the clay original of his statue of Samson, which stands in the city of Gillette, Wyo.**

# PRICE: Panel members instantly knew they had prized piece the moment they saw it

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campus buzz grew louder, and university students began parading through the art studio to gawk and marvel. The finished work got statewide attention — not just because of the quality of the work, but also because the artist had never done anything remotely like it. Only later was the clay sculpture reproduced as a bronze.

Aberdeen commissioned him to sculpt a bronze war memorial for its regional airport, and soon afterward Victor's brother Simeon told him about an intriguing call for entries: The state of Nevada was commissioning a bronze of Sarah Winnemucca, the American-Indian woman who'd gone before Congress in 1880 to advocate on behalf of the Paiute and Washoe people.

"I was excited about it but I didn't really think I had a chance," Victor said. "I was one of the four finalists, though. One, Ed Dwight of Denver, is so well known I was honored just to be in the same sentence."

The poker-faced selection committee brought in the sculptors and their bronze miniatures, called maquettes, one at a time — none of the applicants having been permitted to even catch a glimpse of the others' works.

"They didn't bat an eye, they were so stoic, and I didn't know whether they liked it or not," Victor said. "The wife of the governor (of Nevada, Kenny Guinn) was in there with them, though, and she told me later that they knew the minute they saw it. That was the one. Mine was the one."

Now there's a 1,500-pound Sarah Winnemucca at the state capital in Carson City, Nev., another at the Capitol building in Washington and several smaller Sarah Winnemuccas at various locations around the country. You

## ON THE INTERNET

Benjamin Victor Studios:  
[www.benjaminvictor.com](http://www.benjaminvictor.com)  
National Statuary Hall Collection:  
[www.aoc.gov/cc/art/nsh/index.cfm](http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/nsh/index.cfm)

can have a Sarah Winnemucca of your own, too — just get in line and prepare to write a check.

Victor charges \$14,000 for a 3-foot-tall Sarah. (Gov. Guinn of Nevada owns one, and the Grant Sawyer Building, a Las Vegas government center, is about to dedicate another.) An 18-inch version runs \$5,500 (Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada owns one of the 12 in existence, and 18 others are on order, Victor said.)

Want the same version that will stand in the U.S. Capitol rotunda for the next six months or so, before it moves in permanently with the others in the statuary hall? Pony up \$85,000. Bronze isn't cheap, and neither is the time and expertise of the sculptor, who graduated in May 2004 and is now an artist in residence at Northern State.

His calendar is full. He has completed a bronze "Jesus With Children" for a Bakersfield schoolteacher who works with his mother, Bessie Owens Elementary kindergarten teacher Joyce Victor. But the Aberdeen airport is still waiting for a third soldier to complete its war memorial, and other projects await as well.

Between all that and family (Victor and his wife, Julie, have two small children), there is little time for reflection, let alone basketball.

But the past three years have made him a firm believer in destiny.

"I've trekked down a lot of roads where I didn't know where I was headed," he said. "I've taken blind steps and they've worked out for me.



COURTESY OF BEN VICTOR

**Ben Victor, left, shakes hands with Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., at the presentation of Victor's bronze sculpture of Sarah Winnemucca.**

"So many people have to force themselves to wake up for work," he said. "It's a blessing to be excited about it."

Of course, it always helps to have

achieved national renown as an artist. And for it to happen somewhat by accident, and four years before your 30th birthday — well, that must be destiny.