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Artist Shan Gray says he always thought he'd "do something big" with his sculpture "The American."

Artist shows good form

► The creator of the planned bronze sculpture that may become the nation's tallest has been plying his craft since the tender age of 3.

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Shan Gray's first sculpture was a stegosaurus created out of clay when he was 3 years old.

"My mother loved it," the Osage artist said. "She said she knew then that I had a gift for art because you could actually tell what it was."

The 47-year-old Gray is now undertaking what likely will be the largest artistic endeavor of his life -- "The American," a sculpture that could become the tallest free-standing bronze in the nation.

"I always thought I'd do something big with this sculpture," he said of his sculpture that competed on a smaller scale for the spot on top of the state Capitol dome.

The American finished atop a popular survey but not the Capitol. In the end, the Capitol Preservation Commission chose former state Sen. Enoch Kelly Haney's "The Guardian" for the prized spot on the dome.

"I was told that the style was too European," Gray said. "I took that as a compliment, since the greatest sculptors have come from Europe."

That popular interest, however, grew a 20-foot statue for the dome into a 176-foot monument to mankind, he said.

Last week, Gray announced that he had chosen Tulsa over Oklahoma City as home to the proposed monument.

The 17-story sculpture will sit on a four-story, limestone-concrete base, bringing the total height to 21 stories that will be built to withstand an F3 tornado.

The sculpture depicts a young American Indian warrior with his hair being blown across his face. His right arm is raised as a bald eagle, wings spread, lands on his shroud-covered forearm.

It is a \$26 million project that will be privately funded with the city providing a site and necessary infrastructure. That site is expected to be announced this week with a completion date in 2007 to coincide with the state's centennial celebration.

Gray said he may not be a world-renowned artist, but that is not his goal.

"Not many people can tell you the name of the artist who did the Statue of Liberty, and I hope to follow in his footsteps. What is important to me is the message I create," he said.

Some of Gray's work does have national recognition. They include sculptures of Olympic Gold Medalist Shannon Miller and Hall of Fame pitcher Warren Spahn, along with busts of William Bright, founder of the Campus Crusade for Christ in Florida and winner of the international Templeton Award, and Nazih Zuhdi, a world-renowned transplant surgeon and medical innovator.

His two brothers and sister also are artists.

A native of Bartlesville, Gray is the youngest son of an Osage Indian father and European-mix mother. His three older siblings, two brothers and a sister, are all artists, a trait Gray attributes to his father, who was killed in an automobile accident at age 53. His mother died of breast cancer when she was in her 70s.

Gray said his mother was such a supporter of all her children's artwork that he stopped asking her for an opinion because it was so biased.

His strong faith and rich family culture played an important role in his creation of The American.

"This sculpture is dedicated to my family; my Indian family and my white ancestry. I am a product of the diversity that is the very heritage of Oklahoma," he said.

Gray said his grandfather was an orphan during the Indian wars of the late 1800s. "At 47, I'm only second-

generation removed from the Indians who settled in Oklahoma."

From former high school and college classmates to family, it's hard to find anyone who knows Gray that is critical of his work or the The American project.

"Shan has always had that natural ability to see things and recreate them in three dimension. He is a true artist with a God-given talent," said his older brother, Clancy Gray, an art teacher at East Central High School.

"He won't toot his own horn, but his works speak volumes," his brother said.

Gray lives in Edmond and he and his wife, Melanie, have a 13-year-old daughter, Evan.

Melanie met Gray while he was working as a commercial graphic artist with the former TransMedia Communications of Oklahoma City. Gray said it was his wife who pushed him to work full time on his sculpting in 1986.

"I didn't want to squelch his artistic ability, the talent that God gave him. I knew he needed to do this," Melanie said.

Gray said outside his family, his greatest influences came from his Bartlesville High School art teacher, Bill McKinney, and Jack Grace, his siblings' private art teacher, who took an interest in Gray even before he had started kindergarten.

It's difficult to get Gray to talk about his individual pieces; he claims he's too critical, always seeing things that he would like to change. "In my eyes, my work is never finished," he said.

He also doesn't like to describe what people should see in his pieces. "I want my work to speak for itself, let the viewer see what he or she sees."

But Gray, who attended Oklahoma State University and the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond, lights up and doesn't hesitate to talk about his style, the mechanics of sculpting and the latest technologies in casting. He said he specializes in the human form.

"My work is classical Renaissance with the finish of early Florentine. Some think my work is more Baroque or Romantic."

While working on a nearly 4-foot scale of The American for wind-tunnel testing, Gray is finishing up a commissioned piece for Oklahoma City University.

That project includes three larger-than-life bronzes of OCU alums who also were Oklahoma's Miss Americas: Jane Jayroe, 1966; Susan Powell, 1981; and Shawntel Smith, 1996.

Gray's 181/2-foot bronze statue of Miller performing on the balance beam stands in a park in Edmond. His 91/2-foot bronzes of Spahn are at Turner Field in Atlanta and at the Oklahoma Sports Museum in Guthrie. Busts of Bright will go to the Christian Crusade headquarters in Florida and its training center in Colorado. The Zuhdi bust is at the Baptist Medical Center's Nazih Zuhdi Transplant Institute in Oklahoma City.