Sculptor enjoys facing new challenges

By Cathy Stahl

The bust of the Rev. Carl Reinert, S.J., in the Reinert Alumni Library was the first bronze bust done by John Lajba. But taking on different challenges is nothing new for the 26-year-old sculptor.

"You'd never say I can't do something because I don't know how," he said. "People can learn and strive for goals. You might as well dream while you still have the chance."

Lajba first came to Creighton four years ago while attending Bellevue College. He wanted to learn a new method of casting bronze that was not being taught at Bellevue.

Certificate program

The Rev. Lee Lubbers, S.J., head of Creighton's sculpture lab and telecommunications center, taught a certificate program that Lajba took. Lubbers now lets Lajba use his sculpture lab while Lajba helps Lubbers with his work.

"I work in satellite communications and I lend a hand if Father Lubbers needs it in the sculpture lab," Lajba said.

Lajba graduated from Bellevue College with a bachelor's degree in fine arts two years ago.

A bronze statue of Olympic gold-medal gymnast Jim Hartung was Lajba's first commissioned work in 1980. Reinert then became Lajba's first bust.

"I did the bust because I wanted to see if I could cast something that large in bronze," Lajba said. "I really didn't know who to do at that time there was publicity on Reinert."

Very impressed

After reading about Reinert, Lajba said he was very impressed and decided to do his first bust of him.

"I worked from photos," Lajba said. "But then people who knew Reinert personally came in and told me about the man and how they thought the sculpture should be."

It took Lajba two months, working an average of four hours a day, to complete the bust. Lajba said the people at Bellevue College liked the bust, purchased it and donated it to Creighton.

"The reason they purchased it was because Father Reinert did a lot for Bellevue College and they were very grateful to him," Lajba said.


Flying uniform

"Doolittle is my favorite bust," Lajba said. "I was in charge of everything from the pedestal to the initial design. He is 87 years old now, and I wanted to capture the spirit of his accomplishments, so I did the bust of him in his 1942 flying uniform."

Lajba said he prefers to call his works portraits instead of busts because he wants each to be a portrait of the individual that captures the person's character and life.

"That's what I feel I have done with Doolittle," he said. Other commissions Lajba has received are for busts at St. John's University; William M. Thelen, founder of Godfather's Pizza; and Glen Machenich, a prominent Omaha automobile dealer and manufacturer.

He is currently working on something for the Omaha Public Power District, a project he said he can't talk about.

"Right now I'm trying to develop a national reputation where I can get commissions from anywhere in the country," Lajba said. "I do this by showing people, like corporations, what I can do and let them decide if I can do something for them."

Growing experience

The challenge to do interesting things and things he has never done before is what keeps Lajba going, he said.

Lajba said that being at Creighton has been a growing experience for him.

"Father Lubbers taught me how to think about art," Lajba said. "The object isn't what is so precious; it's things that you get from your heart and put into the object that's important."

Lajba said he will continue working with bronze until it becomes boring, but he doesn't see that coming for a long time.

"It's still exciting and it's still a pain in the butt," he said. "It's such an achievement when you have sculptured a bust in bronze and get to really look like someone even though the material you use is nothing like the person's face."

Lajba with bust of Reinert

Photo by Scott Lyons

Doolittle bust.

If I can do something for them."