

# SCULPTURES COME TO LIFE AT McGARY STUDIOS

By Mandy Marksteiner

**S**ome of the nation's most authentic bronze representations of Native American life and the American West are sculpted just a few hours away at the McGary Studios in Ruidoso.

Regionally, bronze sculptor Dave McGary is perhaps most well known for "Free Spirits at Noisy Water," an equine masterpiece located at the entrance of the Hubbard Museum of the American West. However, he's renowned across the nation for his ability to capture the human spirit in his sculptures of Native Americans.

"I've been to numerous ceremonies where I'm the only white person there," said McGary. "You step back 150 years. People aren't supposed to take pictures—or notes. Luckily, I have a photographic memory. I usually don't start a sculpture until it's complete in my mind."

The McGary bronzes begin as a wax sculpture. He sculpts an unclothed human and then layers the intricate clothing and jewelry over that. The wax sculpture becomes a bronze monument through the "lost wax method." At a bronze foundry a rubber mold is made of the wax sculpture, which they use to make a wax replica. The wax replica is dipped into white slurry that dries to make a ceramic shell. The shell is heated until the wax melts away, leaving a hollow cavity where they pour the molten bronze.

Because of the detail and size, sometimes it takes up to 160 separate rough castings to make a single sculpture. "My work is very difficult to cast," said McGary. "One foundry just does the feathers and beads and sends them to Ruidoso in little bags. They're like jewelry."

Artisans grind, weld, resurface and sandblast the bronze at the foundry and finishing studio McGary opened in 1981. This is done to remove imperfections and to make it as close to the original wax sculpture as possible.

Subtle differences in skin tone are created by speeding up the oxidation process. This involves heating the bronze and applying chemicals one small section at a time. Each feather, gun, sword, and the unique beadwork for each statue is individually hand painted by artists, using techniques that McGary has developed over 30 years.

There is a sense of purpose behind McGary's attention to detail in documenting Native American history as realistically as possible.

For the past 30 years, McGary has spent significant time at reservations, attending and studying ceremonies. But, to the Native Americans, he wasn't just an outsider doing research, he became a family member.



"As an artist, I am looking for inspiration. I love history. I'm happy to devote my artistic talents towards that," said McGary. "That's why I've been accepted. They see me as someone who can document their culture."

McGary's interest in Native American cultures began in Santa Fe, where he moved in 1978 after studying in Italy.

He became friends with Kevin and Ken Yellow Mountain, two students at the Institute of American Indian Arts. They invited McGary to spend a week at Fort Peck Reservation in Poplar, Missouri.

He wound up spending the entire summer at the reservation. There, he discussed history with their uncle, the Sioux historian, Gerald Red Elk.

"Gerald knows everything about their people," said McGary, adding, "they're very skeptical when you first go there. It takes a while to get their trust. But once you do, they're so supportive."

Impressed with his desire to learn, the Red Elks brought McGary into their family by giving him an adoption ceremony with a feast and a new name, Big Eagle. Eagles are spiritual messengers, and Gerald Red Elk believes that McGary is a messenger with his artwork.

In the years since, McGary has gained the trust and respect of numerous other Native American groups.

In 1999, McGary was selected to sculpt Shoshone warrior and peacemaker Chief Washakie for display at the U.S. Capital Rotunda in Washington, D. C. The selection committee included several members of the Washakie family, and afterward, the family asked McGary to sculpt another depiction of Chief Washakie, "Battle of Two Hearts," which is



**PHOTOS:** (Pictured on previous page) Dave McGary puts some finishing touches on one of his sculptures. (Center) This epic sculpture, "Battle of Two Hearts" is located in front of the Washakie Center at the University of Wyoming. It was created by McGary in 2001. (Right) Sculptor Dave McGary's "Free Spirits at Noisy Water," is located at the entrance of the Hubbard Museum of the American West. The sculpture, created in 1995, is a string of eight larger-than-life horses, each weighing between 3 and 5 tons, bounding down a hillside led by a 2-ton thoroughbred that is balanced on a single hoof.

installed in front of the Washakie Center at the University of Wyoming.

After spending time with the Washakie family, McGary received another nickname. "They call me Two Chairs because I'm big and take up so much space."

While in Washington, D. C. for the dedication, he was invited to tour the photo archives at the Smithsonian Museum. He was fascinated by the old photos and one of them inspired his latest sculpture, "Pow Wow Limo." In it, three Plains Indians are taking a road trip to a pow-wow in a 1932 Ford Roadster. Sculpting "Pow Wow Limo" gave McGary the chance to express his love for classic cars and share his happy memories of being a guest at numerous pow-wows.

McGary continues to receive invitations to sculpt from

across the nation. Recently, a holy man of the Karankawa tribe, Larry Running Turtle, commissioned McGary to sculpt a monument for the Hans and Pat Suter Wildlife Refuge in Corpus Christi where Hurricane Ike unearthed more than 5,000 graves at an ancient Native American burial site dating back over 2,000 years.

And who knows? Big Eagle, Two Chairs McGary just may pick up another new nickname.

McGary's Ruidoso gallery, located at 2002 Sudderth Drive, is open Monday to Thursday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information, visit [www.davemcgary.com](http://www.davemcgary.com).

Editor's Note: Author Mandy Marksteiner graduated from Lawrence University in 2004 and now lives in Los Alamos with her husband and son. For more information, visit [www.mandymarksteiner.com](http://www.mandymarksteiner.com)

*Fordtown*

Ford  
Lincoln  
Mercury

Growing and changing to meet the needs of Carlsbad!



2802 W. Pierce • Carlsbad, NM • 575.885.3101

Home Decor & Gifts • Candles • Interior Design Services  
Jewelry • Bridal Registry • Floral Arrangements  
Antiques & Collectibles • Kitchen Accessories



(575) 885-3735

117 W. Mermod - Carlsbad, NM 88220

- OPEN TUESDAY to SATURDAY -