

12-foot bronze of MLK to be unveiled at plaza in NLV

Sculptor hopes statue reveals soul, passion of slain rights champion

By Kristen Peterson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Sculptor Tina Allen recently recalled a time in Knoxville, Tenn., when she watched a group of children playing on a bronze statue of Alex Haley, which she created for the city's Haley Heritage Square Park.

As the children sat on the 5-ton statue of the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Allen said she overheard a little boy telling another child, "My dad has ears like Alex Haley."

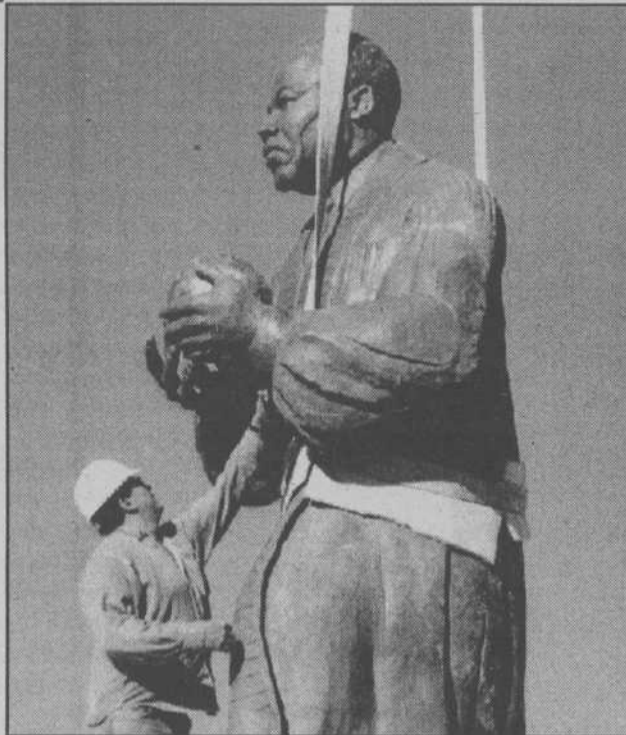
Within the child's boasting is the premise of Allen's artwork.

"I want children to be able to say, 'Greatness comes from people who look like me,'" Allen said during a phone interview from her Los Angeles studio.

That statement has become a slogan for the internationally renowned sculptor, whose works include a bronze bust of Ralph Bunche, the first black American to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, and Sojourner Truth, an anti-slavery activist.

Her recent work, a 12-foot-high bronze statue of slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., will be unveiled Jan. 20 in North Las Vegas.

Holding the U.S. Constitution, a Bible and a globe of the world, the statue stands at



Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

Securing the bronze statue, Hiram Jones works at releasing the harness from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

the center of the new Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza at Martin Luther King Boulevard and Carey Avenue.

"He looks meditative and spiritual," Allen said, adding that she hopes that people will respond to the statue with the response: "I am standing in the shadow of a great soul. I can be more."

"Martin Luther King is more than a set of conditions he changed," Allen said. "He is a way of life."

Born in the West Indies,

Allen was raised among a family of musicians, including her father, Gordon "Specs" Powell, a professional percussionist. Her uncle was a sculptor and bass player.

"I always believed you could make a living supporting your family by making art," Allen said.

Allen began painting at age 5. She studied visual arts at the University of South Alabama, Pratt Institute in New York and the Univer-

sity of Venice in Italy.

Allen said she always knew she would create artwork reflecting great leaders and people from the black community.

"I've always had this message," Allen said. "I've been singing the same song relentlessly. Other artists thought it would pigeonhole me, limit my career. That couldn't be farther from the truth."

She designed the Thurgood Marshall Lifetime Achievement Award, sculpted a life-size bust of late U.S. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and a statue of black labor leader A. Philip Randolph. During the '90s Allen presented the sculpture "The Icon I — Tribute to the African-American Man" to Nelson and Winnie Mandela.

Her upcoming projects, she said, include a George Washington Carver statue to be created for the Missouri Botanical Garden and a Dorothy Dandridge statue, which will have a home in Culver City, Calif.

"These pieces are part of an ongoing body of work that writes our history in bronze," Allen said. "There are many

wonderful stories that happened in America and couldn't have happened anywhere else."

The sculptures represent contributions made by blacks in all areas of society.

"These people were honored and enlarged to mammoth proportions because of their soul," Allen said. "When we use aesthetics as a measure of greatness, what we're doing is reducing the amount of creative potential this country has to offer. It's time to refocus attention on substance."

The Martin Luther King Jr. plaza in North Las Vegas is being created as an inspirational center. The statue of King stands on a black granite foundation and reflecting pool. Palm trees, benches and a wall featuring King's most famous quotes decorate the plaza.

Spearheaded by County Commissioner Yvonne Atkinson Gates, construction of the plaza is a project that falls under Southern Nevada's enterprise community. Southern Nevada was selected in 1994 to be an enterprise community as part of

President Clinton's challenge to revitalize economically depressed areas.

Other projects include the new Shade Tree shelter for homeless women and children and a new dental center serving low-income residents.

The land for the plaza was donated by Chic Hecht, a former U.S. senator and ambassador, said Douglas Bell, manager of community resources management for Clark County. Nearly \$42,000 was donated by the private sector for the statue.

"The statue reflects a coming of age in our community," Bell said, noting that racial segregation in hotels lasted until the mid-1960s in Las Vegas, and until the 1940s blacks were not allowed to purchase homes.

"I hope (the statue and plaza) inspires youth to realize that the history of America is made by all of us," Bell said. "Not just one racial group."

"It's important for people to identify with heroes," Kristen Peterson

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King site working to attract more visitors

ATLANTA (AP) — The guest book at the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic Site reads like a world atlas, with visitors signing in daily from Germany, Japan, Canada and South America.

But don't ask metro Atlantans how to get to the site, which includes King's birthplace, grave and his most famous speaking location — the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

"I don't even know where it is," said Mariko Miki, who lives in suburban Roswell. "I never see any advertisements for it or anything. My family goes to museums downtown a lot, so you'd think it'd be something we'd go do, but we've never been there."

"Not too much happens around here except around the King holiday," said Ruby Williams, who has cut hair since 1970 at Lady Byrd's Beauty Salon in the heart of King's Sweet Auburn neighborhood.

Hoping to increase interest, officials of the site and the National Park Service are trying to make it a gathering place for the neighborhood much as Ebenezer Baptist Church was when King occupied the pulpit. The original church became part of the site after the congregation moved to a new building across the street in 1999.

The park service has started monthly gospel concerts and lectures at the church to draw residents.

Nearly complete is an almost two-decade, \$10 million project to restore the Sweet Auburn neighborhood, an effort spearheaded by the King family and undertaken by the park service.

Many of the buildings had deteriorated to burned-out shells, home to vagrants and crack addicts. Now, many of the Queen Anne-style homes that line the block where King was born boast restored wooden porches and fresh coats of paint.

"People here are really proud about this neighborhood," said Saudia Muwakkil, spokeswoman for the visitor's center. "But certainly we would like to see more interaction with visitors and local residents, to bring the locals out. People here don't realize the treasure we have here."

The Park Service also plans to team with King's alma mater, nearby Morehouse College, to educate students there about the civil rights movement and train them in nonviolent conflict resolution. The education center could be open by 2002 and will emphasize getting involved in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood, Muwakkil said.

"There's a universal message in King's work that attracts people," she said. "We want to keep that story alive, expand it here in Atlanta, so people see the connections between King's life and the history of Atlanta."

The effort to attract Atlantans to the King site is long overdue, Sweet Auburn resident Sam Owens said.

"There are people from all over the world here. This is the center of our history right here," he said. "But Atlanta people, they're used to him. They don't come here. I'd like it more if we were the center again, to Atlanta people. We need to keep it up, show people we haven't forgotten where we came from."

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