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Indian woman's statue carved for San Xavier

By Kris Walkinshaw

CASA GRANDE DISPATCH

CASA GRANDE — A Casa Grande woodcarver has created a beautiful likeness of an American Indian woman who may become a saint.

The 4-foot-tall statue of Kateri Tekakwitha is made of poplar wood and took about two months and 200 hours to complete. The statue will sit in the chapel at San Xavier del Bac Mission, located southwest of Tucson.

Tekakwitha was the daughter of a Mohawk warrior and a Christian Algonquin woman. At age 4, smallpox swept through her village, killing her brother and her parents, and she was left with "unsightly scars and poor eyesight." She was adopted by her uncle, a chief of the Turtle Clan. While living along the Mohawk River in a fort called Caughnawaga, she converted and was baptized in 1676 by Father Jacques de Lamberville, a Jesuit. At her baptism, she took the name "Kateri," a Mohawk pronunciation of "Catherine."

Because she was persecuted by her American Indian kin, Tekakwitha moved to Canada where she lived a life dedicated to prayer, penitential practices and care for the sick and aged. In 1679, she took a vow of chastity. A year later, Tekakwitha died at age 24.

She was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1980, the first American Indian to receive this status in a path to sainthood.

Tom Jenkins carved wood as a hobby until he lost his job several years ago. Since that time, woodcarving has been his full-time job at his home near Signal Peak.

"I've been an electrician most of my life, but I got laid off from my job," he said. "Rather than look for a new job I told my wife that I'd give this a try."

The Rev. Stephen Barnufsky, a priest at the historic Catholic mission, contacted Jenkins through his Web site and commissioned him to carve the statue.

"I wanted a statue because it's one of the few Native Americans being recognized for sainthood," he said. "I shared my ideas; he was very open to produce what I wanted."

He added it was important to him to find an Arizona artist.

The statue will be on permanent display in one of the side altars in the church.

"Just the fact that my work will be placed among all of the antiques at San Xavier — I'm very pleased," Jenkins said.

He uses a variety of power tools to complete his .

Jenkins has worked on a variety of different projects over the years. Some of the more memorable pieces he's carved include the Ten Commandments and many animals including a rattlesnake, an eagle, a coyote, and a camel.

Jenkins said he remembers one unusual request in particular.

"Someone asked me to do a bust of Stevie Ray Vaughan, the blues guitarist," he said. "I had never heard his music played. I had to look him up."

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