



LOCAL

Deep in the South County countryside, Toby Mendez works his sculptural magic

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Tucked away behind trees, surrounded by farms and down a gravel road sits Toby Mendez Studios.

A series of red cottage-like structures in Pleasant Valley, an area in the southern edge of Washington County, is not where one would expect to find a widely acclaimed sculptor.

Antonio Tobias “Toby” Mendez’s sculptures can be found in 18 states. His work, typically larger-than-life bronze statues of notable figures, includes the Thurgood Marshall Stature outside of the Maryland State House, Boston Red Sox Players in Fenway Park and three panels at the U.S. Navy Memorial in Washington, D.C.

But closer to home, Mendez has multiple sculptures in progress that will be installed in Washington County.

He has found his niche in recreating human forms, a skill that sets him apart from other artists. Sculpting the human figure, Mendez said, is challenging and inspiring.

“It’s one of the most streamlined ways of communicating as an artist because people can identify with figures,” Mendez said.

As a public artist, Mendez said he knows most people don’t know the names of sculptures. However, he hopes people walk away from his pieces having learned more about the history behind the people celebrated in them and possibly being inspired to create.

Mendez was born in Colorado but grew up overseas in Japan and Thailand. His family moved to Pleasant Valley in 1974, when Mendez was 11 years old.

The house, red and wooden with Asian-inspired features, blends with accompanying art studio and gallery that was added later. Now, the home is decorated with his family’s artwork from throughout the years.

Behind the structure is Mendez’s own sculpture garden where you might hear his dog, Django, barking.

Both Mendez's parents were creative, he said. His mother was a decorator and his father was a painter. One of his mother's sculptures inspired his interest in the art form.

Mendez's father, Antonio "Tony" Mendez, rose to fame when his work for the CIA was turned into the Academy Award-winning film "Argo." But Tony Mendez was first and foremost an artist. He created oil paintings of Pleasant Valley and other nearby areas.

Tony Mendez was hired for the CIA's graphics department before he became a spy, Toby said.

Toby Mendez painted while he was in art school, but mostly stopped when he realized his strength in sculpture. He started again following his father's death in 2019, painting mostly landscapes and people.

Inside the sculptor's studio

When Toby was in high school, he and his dad built an art studio next to the home to mitigate the dust the young sculptor created.

"We always did it together. Even when I was a teenager, we had a little studio in the house," Mendez said.

Now under the wooden rooftop is a gallery with paintings by father and son, smaller versions of Toby's sculptures

and a director-style chair from “Argo.” The gallery was completed by the Mendezes after Toby returned from art school.

Toby sometimes invites people to the gallery and is considering opening his doors again soon.

Visitors to his sculpting studio are surrounded by hundreds of Mendez's clay, foam and casted historical figures.

Molding small clay figures is the first step toward creating one of his iconic sculptures. The clay figure is sent to a company to enlarge it into a larger-than-life size foam statue. Mendez then covers the foam in more clay, adding back in details that might be lost in the enlargement process.

Once he has perfected the sculpture, it is sent to a refinery to be casted and turned into bronze.

A bucolic setting for a studio

Toby Mendez apprenticed in Los Angeles with John Chambers, an Oscar-winning makeup sculptor. He then earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Art Institute of Chicago.

He has lived in Pleasant Valley ever since. While he does like to get away and see the world, Mendez said he'll always feel sentimental when coming back home.

"You don't have to live in a major city to be an artist, you can do it in a rural setting," Mendez said. "It's a very inspiring location ... just a beautiful area."

When sculpting historical figures, he must research everything from their measurements, clothing and anything historians might recognize.

Sometimes, as with Gandhi, Mendez has plenty of photos to reference. But with other figures, he isn't so lucky. The Thomas Kennedy statue in downtown Hagerstown was created with just a pen drawing of Kennedy from the 19th century, the only likeness of the late local legislator.

Tom Riford, assistant secretary of the Maryland Department of Commerce, has worked with Mendez on Washington County projects including the Kennedy statue.

What sets Mendez apart, Riford said, is how he creates meaning in his art. "He's a quiet leader of change through his art... he creates things that tell a story," he said, adding that there are hidden pieces to the Kennedy statue that make it come alive.

Kennedy sponsored legislation to allow Jewish people hold public office in the Maryland; Mendez's likeness of him stands across the street from Congregation B'nai Abraham. In his hand, Kennedy holds a hat and a shofar, a ram's horn used in Jewish ceremonies.

The statue stands on bricks, which Riford said represent the bricks Kennedy walked on in Annapolis while working for eight years to pass the "Jew Bill."

His current projects include a rendering of Clara Barton, planned for the Hagerstown Cultural trail. Barton was a Civil War nurse and the founder of the American Red Cross.

Al Martin, chairman of the Clara Barton Memorial Committee, said they picked Mendez because of his unbeatable reputation in the art world. Martin said the project couldn't have been successful without Mendez's art-world connections.

"He's been a wonderful mentor and consultant to the group," Martin said. "I would not have been able to raise the money that we did if not for his engagement with the project."

The mold is now at a Pennsylvania refinery, and the committee hopes to install the statue this fall.

Mendez also is working on a sculpture of fly fisherman Lefty Kreh that will be installed in Frederick, Md.

Mendez receives direct requests for around two-thirds of his projects; the rest are won through competitions with other artists.

Public art, Mendez said, is important because it can draw the attention of a passerby to the history of an area or person. This is his dream job, he said — creating everyday while being independent.

"If you think about your travels," Mendez said, "you usually walk away remembering public art, things that inspire you."

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Toby Mendez points to a mold of Lefty Kreh in his studio. *Katharine Wilson*



Toby Mendez and his statue of Judge Frank Cicone in his backyard sculpture garden. *Katharine Wilson*



Toby Mendez's sculpture studio in Pleasant Valley. Katharine Wilson



Toby Mendez's art gallery in Pleasant Valley. Katharine Wilson