

# Former mechanic carves career as sculptor

## Bryan Berenson sees reactive arthritis as gift from God

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Many people spend their entire lives trying to find something about which they are passionate. Hartland resident Bryan Berenson, 49, a sculptor, not only discovered his passion, but made a career out of it.

Berenson's enthusiasm for art developed when he was stationed in the U.S. Army.

"I was a mechanic in Germany, and I saw the cathedrals and the churches and castles over there and I just fell in love with that. But I couldn't do anything with it," he told the Catholic Herald in a recent interview.

He began sculpting as a hobby when his parents bought him an instructional book one Christmas on how to carve a Santa Claus. Berenson, a member of St. Charles Parish, Hartland, didn't consider making a career out of art until he discovered he had reactive arthritis, a painful joint disease that covered his body and forced him to end his career as a diesel mechanic.

"After that I went to college to become an engineer, which was the most logical

thing, but my wife, seeing the hours I was putting into it, didn't like that too much," he said.

About that time, a magazine article advertising a school in Austria that teaches people how to carve caught his eye.

"So we thought we'd go there for vacation and just kind of check it out. And they offered an apprenticeship program over there, and as I was carving, the light went on and I knew that was for me," explained Berenson.

Starting in 1999, Berenson took on a five-year apprenticeship at the Schnitzschule Geisler-Moroder in Austria that ended with an eight-hour exam given by the Austrian government, certifying him as a wood and stone sculptor.

Berenson is working on a 10-week program in Austria to become a master sculptor of wood and stone. With four weeks behind him, he prepares to take on another three weeks this year and plans on finishing the last three weeks next year.

"It's kind of a lost art here in America.



**Bryan Berenson**, a member of St. Charles Parish, Hartland, works on a piece of artwork in his Hartland studio. (Catholic Herald photos by John Kimpel)

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**Fr. Kenneth Omer-nick**, pastor of St. Charles Parish, Hartland, incenses the Our Lady of Lourdes statue created by parishioner and artist, Bryan Berenson, during an Oct. 20, 2013 dedication. Pictured at far right of the photo with cameras are Bryan Berenson and his wife, Jennifer.

Handmade things cost money, so if we can get things that are mass-produced, it's much cheaper. That's what I'm up against. There is a niche of people who appreciate it," he said.

When it comes to sculpting through his arthritis pain, Berenson admitted he faces hardships, but remains positive and works through it.

"It affects my sleep a lot, so I don't sleep well at nights and I don't start off in the morning until 10 or so," he said, describing his varied work schedule. "It hurts, especially when I'm doing marble; it's kind of robust work, but I set my hours and I set my pace, and it all works out."

In fact, Berenson stays so upbeat that he views his developing reactive arthritis not as a hindrance, but a gift.

"I often wonder, if I didn't have arthritis, I'd probably go back to being a mechanic.

So I look at it like, maybe this is why I have arthritis, God is pushing me in this direction," he said.

Berenson is working on a number of projects, including interior woodworking for a hotel in Minnesota, a 2-foot tall figure of Christ for a crucifix, masks for a local Austrian Mardi Gras club, and a few others.

Berenson also loves sculpting things for his home in Hartland and for his wife, Jennifer, and son, Dylan. He carved a front door for their house, made a fountain sculpture of his representation of God's hands creating the universe in the back yard, sculpted a rocking horse for his son, among others.

"There's always something," he said, revealing his favorite sculpting projects are Nativity sets, which he creates primarily out of wood.

"I carve a new piece for our parish every year, and a new piece for our son every year, so when he's old enough to move out, he'll have a full set for himself," Berenson added.

Last October, Berenson completed a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes for St. Charles Parish. He had offered to make a carving of a crucifix for the church, but instead, Fr. Ken Omer-nick, pastor, came to him with something else in mind: a

marble statue of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Before coming to St. Charles, Fr. Omer-nick met Berenson at his former parish, St. Gregory the Great, Milwaukee, where the sculptor had restored a statue, so he was familiar with his talent.

"When I changed parishes after my term was up, who should be in the front pew but Bryan Berenson," said Fr. Omer-nick. "So I thought wow, we have our own sculptor with an amazing background."

When parish member Karen Philleo and the church's garden club came up with the idea of a Mary statue for the garden,

## People of Faith

**Name:** Bryan Berenson

**Age:** 49

**Parish:** St. Charles Parish, Hartland

**Favorite hobby:** Painting

**Favorite church hymn:** "Amazing Grace"

**Favorite song:** It all depends on the time of the day and the mood I'm in.

Fr. Omer-nick knew right where to go. From there, Berenson designed the entire statue, including the base, and transformed a piece of Italian Corian marble into a beautiful statue.

"Sometimes I think God works in everybody in different ways. He

just gives me ideas. I don't think I have the talent ... sometimes I'll look at what I did and I know it was through God that I was able to do it," he said.

The statue, which stands 5 and a half feet tall and weighs around 900 pounds, took Berenson more than 190 hours to complete.

The garden club plans to create a rose garden surrounding the statue that will accompany a set of two stone benches that last year's eighth grade class donated to the parish. Because of Berenson's handiwork, the parish anticipates having larger May crowning events.

The church grounds have become a popular place for parishioners to wander and reflect, in a large part due to Berenson's statue.

"People will actually walk around the buildings to see what's all planted," said Fr. Omer-nick. "It's a stop along the way where people will sit and pray."

Seeing the parishioners' reactions to his work is the best part of the sculpting process for Berenson.

"When I'm done with something and see the expression on someone's face, their reaction is really gratifying. Just living the process of creating is wonderful. I enjoy it thoroughly; it's a passion," he said.