



► **ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE:** Sister Phyllis Mrozinski joined the Dominican sisters in 1951. She had taught for 24 years when she took her first college-level art class at age 55. She would then find her second calling, as a sculptor.

GOD'S TOOLS

Dominican sculptor carves faith stories out of stone and clay

Dominican Sister Phyllis Mrozinski comes alive in her sculpture studio, exuding a confident trust in God. She's working on a stone depiction of four hands holding a loaf of bread. It will represent either doing service or sharing common life, two pillars of Dominican spirituality.

"I'll pick up the tool and I'll say, 'God, this is your tool. Use my hand to carve whatever you want,'" says Sister Phyllis, an artist-in-residence at Marywood, home to the Grand Rapids Dominicans. "And I tell myself, 'Don't be afraid.' I have to keep telling myself."

There's a particular challenge ahead: shaping an opening encircled by the thumb and index finger on one of the hands. "Henry Moore (the English sculptor) would say it's not a sculpture unless you have an open space," she explains. "When I do that thumb and I have to get underneath it to create an opening, I'll have to keep telling myself, 'Don't be afraid' – Jesus always said, 'Do not be afraid.'"

Sister Phyllis, who turns 85 this month, has had a passion for art and the Dominicans her entire life, although following those passions included a few detours. Born in Bay City and raised in Saginaw, she had an artistic mother and was taught by Dominicans. As early as third grade, she wanted to be just like the sisters. In eighth grade, she asked her principal if she could become a Dominican aspirant and attend Marywood Academy, the order's all-girls high school. The principal said no, encouraging her to stay in Saginaw and enter the congregation after high school.

She stayed, and her religious vocation waned somewhat. She graduated from SS. Peter & Paul in Saginaw, having been elected homecoming queen her senior year. She also worked as a nurse's aide while a student. After high school, she became a Michigan Bell telephone operator and soon a supervisor.

She fell in love and got engaged. But her desire to join the Dominicans ran deeper, and ultimately she followed her heart.

"Marriage was kind of scary for me; once I get into marriage, that's it," recalls Sister Phyllis, adding that

she continued to feel drawn to the order. "I thought, 'I have to try this; I can get out of this if I don't like it.' This is not a sacrament. It is a commitment. I broke my engagement, left, and came in 1951." She was eight days away from her 21st birthday.

"I'm so glad I tried it," she says now. On entering the order, she hoped to study art. She was told no and invited to study history. Not interested in that, she decided on language arts. For the next 24 years, she taught English, religion and art to students in sixth through eighth grades.

Her studies to this point hadn't focused on art; her own interest guided her teaching in that subject. She also offered an enrichment class for boys interested in art. She says it was a delight to give them an opportunity they didn't usually have.

Eventually, Sister Phyllis went to work in the administrative offices at Marywood, designing and producing art for special events. She finally had the opportunity to pursue an art degree, and at 55 she entered Aquinas College's Bachelor of Fine Arts Program. Still, her gift for sculpture hadn't yet been revealed; she believed her interests



► **PREACHER:** This piece is entitled *Dominican Woman Preacher*, her lips sealed because she preaches with actions and not words. As to her art, "If they preach to one person, it's done its duty."

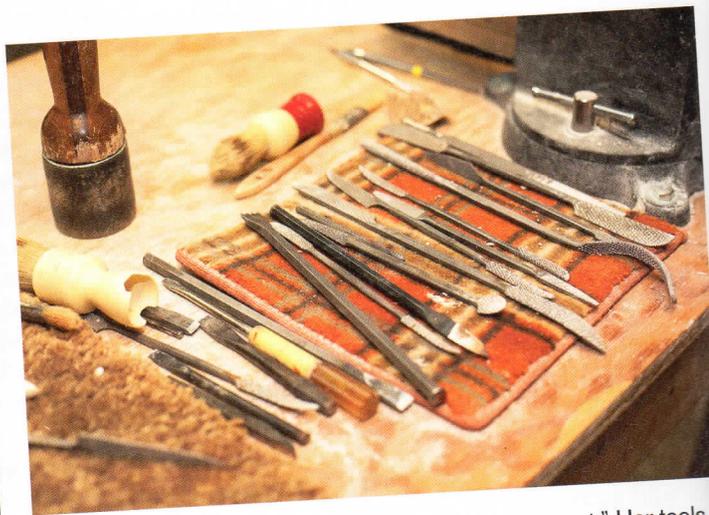
were elsewhere.

"I had to have three hours' credit in sculpture, and I thought, 'OK, I'll do it,'" she says. "It wasn't my plan at all. I was going to be a painter or a drawer or something."

In her first sculpture class, Professor Ron Pederson (now retired) gave each student a slab of wax about the size of a serving tray, which was to be made into three sculptures. Sister Phyllis produced a piece based on a zipper, a vase with flowers and a mud volcano inspired by a trip to Yellowstone.

She says Pederson immediately recognized her natural talent.

By her senior year, Sister Phyllis was Pederson's assistant and was recommended to create a life-size sculpture of St. Thomas Aquinas for the college, to replace one that had been damaged. She took on the project with his mentoring. It started with creating a clay-on-Styrofoam scale model; producing that in her spare time outside classes took eight months. Then, with board approval, she moved on to an 8,640-pound limestone boulder.



► **GOD'S TOOLS:** When Sister Phyllis picks up a tool, she hands it over to God, saying, "Use my hand to carve whatever you want." Her tools also have sentimental value; she still uses her dad's old shaving brushes.

► **SACRED SPACE:** Sister Phyllis tries to spend time daily in her basement studio. Here, she works with the same clay she mixed as a student, using a recipe that includes motor oil and car grease.



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YOU CAN SEE SISTER PHYLLIS' WORK UP-CLOSE AT MARYWOOD, WHERE HER LIFE-SIZE BRONZE OF ST. DOMINIC IS ON DISPLAY OUTDOORS ON THE CAMPUS. THE GALLERY AT DOMINICAN CENTER FEATURES THE WORK OF OTHER WEST MICHIGAN ARTISTS IN EVOLVING DISPLAYS. THE GALLERY, 2025 FULTON ST. E., IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC MONDAY THROUGH THURSDAY, 8 A.M. TO 9 P.M. THURSDAY, 8 A.M. TO 8 P.M. FRIDAY AND 8 A.M. TO 6 P.M. SATURDAY-SUNDAY.

"I bonded with that immediately," she says. "They told me it was coming on a flatbed, and I bonded with it as soon as I saw it turn the corner. 'We have to work together, you and me.'" For the next year, she balanced part-time work with sculpting that stone.

The 30 years since entering Aquinas College's art program have included countless pieces. She's participated in ArtPrize three times and also created the life-size bronze sculpture of St. Dominic on the Marywood campus. Her pieces are her unique form of preaching, she says. "If they preach to one person, it's done its duty. I think that they do, because I've sold quite a few of my pieces – so they speak to people."

Every day, she tries to spend time in her studio – "my sacred space" – working with stone and modeling her concepts in the same clay mixture she made as a student 30 years ago. She also prays there with the angels and saints, and talks with God about his plans for her and her sculpture, describing her work as co-creating with him.

"It was a big surprise to me," she says. "I'd never, ever in my life thought I'd be a sculptor." As do her pieces, a life takes shape over time. "We come out of God's mind and are born for a purpose here. We're born with everything that we need. All we have to do is develop that and chisel away all the rough edges. That's what I do with stone." †



► **MOTHER AND CHILD:** This bronze depicts Mary and Jesus. Sister Phyllis' godchild served as a model for the piece.