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Stone-faced neighbors moving in

17-foot sculptures coming to Deerfield

By Robert Channick

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After years of waiting for its home to be finished, Deerfield's biggest family is finally moving in.

Commissioned in 2003, a two-piece, 17-foot sculpture of a mother, father and their three children will take up residence next week outside the newly remodeled Village Hall, with a little help from a 90-ton crane.

Because the \$6 million expansion project delayed their installation, the towering figures have spent the last year in Lake Zurich, peering out from the treetops on the front yard of sculptor Mary Block's home studio.

With mixed emotions, she and her neighbors bid adieu to the 20,000-pound concrete family Wednesday, when the sculptures were lifted off temporary pads and strapped lengthwise on the back of an air-cushioned flatbed truck for a 14-mile ride to Deerfield. They'll wait at the village's public works building until installation, expected to be next week.

"I've loved working with it, but it is time for it to go," said Block, 55, a prominent North Shore artist who grew up in Deerfield.

The project was envisioned as a way to commemorate Deerfield's 2003 centennial. Block was awarded \$25,000 after submitting a 2 1/2-foot model. When plans for the Village Hall expansion began to take shape in 2004, the sculpture was put on hold, eventually re-emerging with increased dimensions, much to the surprise of village officials.

"When originally commissioned it was thought the figures would be about 12 feet tall," said Phil Kiraly, assistant village manager. "Over the course of the sculpture actually being created, the scale grew by a significant amount."

Last summer, Block erected scaffolding in a wooded area along her street, pouring concrete into molds to form the larger-than-life family scene. Refined throughout the spring, the sculpture was finished in July, becoming a dog-walking draw and the most talked-about yard art in the quiet, unincorporated neighborhood, according to Block.



"The whole experience for the neighborhood has been really nice," she said. "Everyone has really liked it. I haven't gotten any negative comments at all."

With the Village Hall, 850 Waukegan Rd., nearing completion, Deerfield closed on the purchase last week. It is now in the midst of the seemingly Herculean task of relocating the family at a cost of just less than \$20,000 -- nearly as much as the sculptures themselves. The village handed that task off to Methods & Materials, a 17-year-old Chicago company specializing in art, sculpture and artifact transportation and installation.

"It's actually fairly straightforward. It's just a matter of lining up the right equipment," said Roger Machine, director of field operations for the company, which last year erected "Agora," a throng of 106 headless, 9-foot cast-iron sculptures in Grant Park, among other high-profile projects.

The Deerfield pieces are guaranteed to stop traffic when they are installed Tuesday, pending state approval to close two southbound lanes on Waukegan Road for about eight hours while the crane places the figures on the front lawn at Village Hall. Whether they continue to stop traffic in the days ahead is of some concern to officials.

"They're big and I think there's going to be some controversy," Kiraly said. "With public art you always have people that like it or hate it; there's seldom the gray area in between. I think we can anticipate some negative commentary ... but I think the community in general is going to really embrace it as a very nice addition to the village center, something that is different."

He said he does not think the centennial sculpture will seem excessive, nestled among mature oak trees and set against the massive Georgian-style addition to Village Hall.

"The [new] building takes up so much more physical space on the property, it tempers the size of the sculpture," he said.

The village is nonetheless hedging its bets, effectively lopping about a foot off the sculpture by bolting it to a recessed foundation -- 10 cubic yards of buried concrete.

Block's most well-known work may be "Boy On A Swing," a 6 1/2-foot by 4-foot bronze-and-steel sculpture at Central Avenue and Green Bay Road in downtown Highland Park. But she hopes her largest piece will be a big hit in her hometown.

"It will leave an empty spot in my yard, but when it goes to Deerfield, hopefully it communicates with the people that it was done for ... and finds a place in the heart of their community," she said.

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