

IN THE SOURLANDS

Art, Faith and Social Justice

By Caroline Katmann

The recently reworded mission of the Sourland Conservancy states that the organization works to protect, promote and preserve the *unique character* of the Sourland Mountain region. I believe that among the area's richest resources are its *unique inhabitants*. Sculptor, Charles McCollough is one of them.

Charles' most current work is a soon-to-be unveiled maquette of an African-American family at worship. The sculpture that that will be made from this maquette will be enlarged, possibly at the Johnson Atelier, and exhibited at the historic AME Church on Hollow Road as the centerpiece, the "heart", if you will, of the Stoutsburg Sourland African-American History Museum housed in the Church.

Upon hearing about the Sourland Conservancy's and the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association's plans for the sculpture and the museum, Charles' immediate response was "OK, I'm in. What's the next step?" Charles is an artist, but he is also a theologian and social activist. Call it fate, coincidence or divine intervention – we could not have hoped for a more fitting artist for this project and we didn't have to look any further than the Sourlands!

The African American Museum project is a perfect fit with his art, faith and commitment to social action. "It is a morally valuable undertaking. It's a justice issue," Charles explains. "People of African descent have had a terrible time. Our jails are filled more than in any other country with young black men. This is really a very unjust situation. It is important to elevate and appreciate African American history and the enormous contributions African Americans have made and are making to our community. It is also very appropriate for this sculpture to be in a church and to depict a family. The sculpture shows the African American family as a whole. Slavery all but destroyed the African American family and the church has historically been the center of the African American community."

While a Ph.D. student at Drew University, Charles would sketch his professors during lectures. At a friend's urging he began taking formal art lessons and describes his transition from painting to sculpture this way, "My paintings became thicker and thicker until they became sculptures." When asked to explain this further, Charles offers, "I was curious about more than one perspective. What would a person look like from the side and the back as well as from the front? And then it came to me that a sculpture is what I wanted. I apparently think in those terms, in three dimensional images, and sculptures seem to be natural."

Charles and his wife, Carol, met at Southern Methodist University (SMU). They dated when she was a senior and he was in second year of seminary school and they married the very next day after Carol's graduation. Charles continued his studies at SMU while Carol stayed on for her master's degree. Upon graduating from SMU, Charles and Carol came to New Jersey where Charles studied for his Ph.D. at Drew University and Carol taught school. This is what brought them to Hopewell Township and the Sourland Mountain region. Charles and Carol have lived in their charming, 160 year old home in Hopewell Township for over 40 years.

Charles attributes his ability to sculpt to his "gift of dyslexia." He explains why he considers this common "disability" to be a gift: "Unfortunately, our whole educational system is very left brained, very literal

very much involved in books and reading and writing. But art is very much right brained and it 'thinks' in a different way-the same way I 'think' as a dyslexic. Dyslexia can be a gift, if you can figure out how to use it. I hope that people who are strongly right brained and think in images prior to thinking in words would be able to find a way to feel good about who they are."

According to Carol, Charles' gift is his ability to take a complex and inaccessible philosophical or theological concept and transform it into something visual or simple enough for people who don't have a heavy theological degree to understand. This gift is evident in his book, "The Art of Parables," (Copper House, 2008.) in which Charles reinterprets 33 parables of Jesus in two stages. First, he translates each parable through sculpture and then he interprets each one in its historical political and economic context.

Charles' hope is that people will get something deeper than the most simplistic view of religion, when they view his sculptures. "The popular view of religion is not very helpful. I reinterpret the Bible in a way that I hope will give people something that is very positive and hopeful and makes their lives valuable. And not this judgmental condemnation of who they are."

In George McCullough's (no relation) video, "Image and Faith: The Art of Charles McCollough," Charles states that sculpting is the place where art and beliefs come together – a place where he meets God. He also explains that "creativity comes from hard work but it also comes magically. Art is something that arrives like a gift that you don't work for. At the same time, you have to work very hard to achieve it. It's a paradox. You can work your tail off to get something and it never comes. But when you do get something that's an 'Aha!' you probably wouldn't have arrived at that place unless you worked very hard. But the working hard is no guarantee that you'll get there."

When asked of which endeavor he is most proud, Charles admits that he has finally found a way to answer that: "It's the one I'm working on right now. I'm very much involved with the sculpture for the museum. It's sitting in the barn, calling to me."

Recently, Charles and Carol went to the New Brunswick Seminary to retrieve Charles' sculptures that have been on display. In the fall, they will ship 12 sculptures to University Church, UCC, in Seattle, which is very sophisticated in terms of its views of theology and philosophy. They have an artist in residence and are open to art as a part of their religion. This church will be the repository for Charles' sculptures on the west coast. They will be viewed on loan to other churches on the west coast, if they want to have a show or purchase them. Charles is looking for opportunities to get more of his work out of his beautiful barn/studio and into the world.

The world would certainly be a better place for it.

"Image and Faith: The Art of Charles McCollough," is available on YouTube. Charles's other books include "To Love the Earth," "Resolving Conflict with Justice and Peace," and "Faith Made Visible."

Charles' work can be viewed at www.sculpturebymccollough.com.

For more information about the Stoutsburg Sourland African-American Museum, please visit the project's Facebook page and the following websites: www.sourland.org and www.stoutsburgcemetery.com.

Caroline Katmann is the Executive Director of the Sourland Conservancy. The Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that works to protect, promote and preserve the unique character of the Sourland Mountain region. For more information, visit www.sourland.org.