

## The Guardian

by Lindsey Hancock

*"I will stand guard here, over our great state, over our majestic land, over our values."*

-Senator Chief Enoch Kelly Haney at the dedication of his statue at the Oklahoma City Capitol,

June 7, 2002 (1)

The awe-inspiring, Native American warrior sculpture, *The Guardian*, which is mounted atop the Oklahoma State Capitol dome in Oklahoma City, is a wonderful example of how the essence of Native American culture can be broadcasted more effectively through art than through the spoken or written word. One needs only to inspect the warrior's slightly-weathered and wrinkled face to feel the weight of his culture's trials from past centuries. More important, though, one also feels the pride he exudes through his overall form. This tells us that, in spite of his past, he has an enduring spirit that looks to a more hopeful future. Highly emotive, the sculpture thus creates a bridge of unspoken understanding between Native people and people of other cultures.

At 17 feet tall, holding a 22-foot staff (2), and weighing 5980 pounds (3), *The Guardian* has a commanding presence. His bronzed physical body is clearly at its peak of strength, yet, his face looks somewhat more *experienced*. In that regard, the sculptor relayed that he was asked to create a "generic Indian" in face and attire, which could not be identified as belonging to any particular tribe. The aim was for the piece to resonate with all thirty-nine American Indian nations represented in Oklahoma (personal communication with the sculptor, reference #4).

Interestingly, *The Guardian* shows how strength and creativity can coexist, not just in the same art piece, but also through the life of its sculptor. Born on November 12, 1940, near Seminole,

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Oklahoma, Enoch Kelly Haney received a fine arts education (5), and established a distinguished career as a painter, sculptor, gallery owner, businessman, and Oklahoma politician (4). He served in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, was Chairman of the Appropriations Committee in the State Senate, and served as chief of the Seminole tribe (6). Currently, Senator Chief Haney is retired from politics and resides in Norman, Oklahoma, where he lives with his extended family and where he still sculpts (4).

The adornments on the warrior's powerful and muscular form are as meaningful as other elements of his composition. The 22-foot spear, the intricate, handcrafted leggings, and the leather breechcloth reflect the culture's ingenuity and resourcefulness. In the warrior's day, those accoutrements were created from the natural resources found on his Native land (rocks, trees, hide from animals, etc.) and they were crafted with respect for the living things that provided those resources (7). In addition, the circular shield was made to represent the circle of life (5). This conservationist attitude is a Native value that Senator Chief Haney still holds dear (4).

The placement of *The Guardian* is just as meaningful as the form and message of the statue. It is situated on the dome of the Capitol, which represents the seat of political power in Oklahoma. The warrior's body points to the east and his head is turned to the main entrance facing south, where he can "see" who comes and goes. Finally, the warrior's spear pierces his legging as it penetrates the ground, reflecting his tenacity as permanent guardian of the Capitol (3).

Though *The Guardian* sits atop the Oklahoma Capitol, it is much more than just a political symbol. It's also a symbol of Native pride. This is most evident in the warrior's obvious physical strength, but is also demonstrated in the sculpture's historical significance. *The Guardian* was the first American Indian figure commissioned to top a state capitol dome (5), and its creator, Senator Chief Haney, was the first full-blooded American Indian to serve in the Oklahoma legislature (8). As the

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sculptor, himself, said, “The symbolism of this is wonderful. Slowly, there has been recognition of tribal sovereignty in Oklahoma and its contributions to Oklahoma” (9).

Another important aspect of *The Guardian* is that it brings Native and non-Native cultures together through a common bond of human experience. What is that common bond? It is the spirit of endurance that persists in the face of adversity. In keeping with this notion, at the dedication of this great statue, on June 7, 2002, Senator Haney said that his statue represented all Oklahomans (i.e., not just Native Oklahomans) (10). This was particularly appropriate in the aftermath of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building.

Though Senator Haney was paying homage to our great state of Oklahoma that day and his words were appropriate, I argue that his sculpture actually represents more than what he said. It honors those of all cultures who endure hardships and prevail, not just Natives or Oklahomans or Americans, but people of all over the world. In keeping with this notion, the Senator said his inspiration for *The Guardian* was actually seeing Michelangelo’s *David* statue, which he saw with his wife during a trip to Italy in the 1970’s. He also frequently collaborates and/or does business with artists in other cultures (4).

Perhaps this broad reach of *The Guardian* is why I felt a connection with the structure, even before I had the privilege of meeting Senator Haney, in person. Like the Senator, I have the passion to be a leader as well as an artist. I hope to become a rural family medicine physician somewhere in Oklahoma, and I hope to continue painting, drawing, and writing. I also hope to inspire Native youth someday, just as Senator Haney has inspired me.

In a sense, I’ve learned from my research on *The Guardian* that it’s okay for seemingly opposite passions (my love for art and my drive to learn medicine) to coexist. My softer, artistic nature, my love for drawing, painting, and creating beaded and woven jewelry, comes from my

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highly talented Choctaw grandmother, Pokni, who creates breathtaking Choctaw ribbon dresses and intricate bead work (not to mention unbelievable fry bread). In contrast, my harder, more driven, leadership nature comes from the quiet warrior I see in my father, and I embrace that, too, as I will need to draw upon that strength to endure the rigors of medical school someday.

Though Senator Chief Kelly Haney's *The Guardian* is an illustration of a Native American warrior, it's really a work of art that is meant for all people, and it's of enduring, cross-cultural relevance. *The Guardian* and Senator Haney himself represent the ideal melding of creativity, which I see as a "soft" attribute of our Native culture, and powerful intellectual and political leadership, which I see as a "hard" attribute. On a larger scale, for Natives as a whole, *The Guardian* is both a symbol of strength and longsuffering and endurance. Most important, *The Guardian* represents a common bond that unites us with people of other cultures so we can live in better understanding and with more respect for each other in spite of our differences.

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