

MB news

MONUMENT BUILDERS OF NORTH AMERICA

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**Are We There Yet?
New Directions
In Greeley**

**Memorialization—
“Talking
Cemeteries”
Enlighten
Public**



Are We There Yet?

By Dan Bellan, CM

Greeley, Colorado New Directions

At the January 2007 MBNA conference in Cincinnati, I started a dialogue with Debbie Dalton, CM, AICA, and Michael McBride, CM, AICA, the owners of Greeley Monument Works, Inc. in Greeley, CO. The conversation topic focused on the question, *How do we, as monument builders in small- and medium-sized operations, compete in an industry that's grappling with globalization?* We want to do more than simply survive and compete day in and day out. We want to prosper by creating meaningful works of commemorative art. In my opinion, professional, skillful monument builders in North America can do that very well by stepping way outside the box.

In the world today, consumers of our products have the option to purchase bland, uninspiring, mediocre, low-cost memorials on eBay, or from cemeteries and funeral service providers. It's a wide open *world-wide* market, too, and consumers now have the option of buying finished memorials created in Asia. We know that intensified competition and globalization are not going away, so what we need to do is focus on creating new and interesting works for our markets and really challenge the way of looking at what we do. After all, the greatness of America has always been innovation and originality, and the sense of ownership to the nation's heritage that comes with that.

Responding to the Challenge

Greeley Monument Works is one company that is responding aggressively to the challenges our industry faces, and now we'll take a look at how it is addressing the dimension of innovation.

In Greeley, like most places on the continent, the shifting roles at the municipal and privately owned cemeteries are changing the way the public perceives and relates to burial rituals. Not surprisingly, these changes are presenting certain challenges to the small monument business owners. While the challenges are helping to expand Debbie's and Mike's view of the traditional monument building role, more importantly, they are forcing them to offer creative products and services that will forge a new identity as monument builders. As Debbie says, "With the increase of cremation and the decrease of sale of cemetery property, in order for our business to prosper, we had to take a strategic look at why, what, where and how we were going to move forward."



Cover photo, "Untitled I," is a Reuben red granite disc (20-in. diameter) with 4-ft Colorado Buff sandstone posts, and assorted Mexican river pebbles.

What they decided to do for their business was to create a series of new monuments that would be viewed and approached as artworks based more on artistic principles than anything else. To address this creative side of monument building, Greeley Monument Works designed and fabricated a diverse group of sculptural stone products, which could easily be sold into cemeteries or other alternative landscapes.

Interestingly, in Loveland, just a few miles down the road from Greeley, there is an annual three-day outdoor sculptural

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"Moon Glow" is a 20-in. white marble disc that is suspended by aluminum rods on a millstone granite pedestal.

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show that draws more than 340 artists who collectively display approximately 3,500 pieces of sculpture. When Debbie and Mike have walked around this show and talked to artists about the work they like and mentioned that they are memorialists and monument builders, many sculptors have often told them that they, too, have done memorials.

This discovery leads to the question, "*Why don't families approach the monument builders when they want a creative memorial?*" Debbie and Mike believe the reason is that most people just don't think of monument builders as artists!

Taking the lead to broaden the public's perspective, Debbie and Mike are "not trying to be *artists* recognized in the art world," but rather they believe there is a venue for more artistic memorials and have decided to create and present art pieces that could be used as memorials. They find that the public is unaware of what the traditional monument builder does, and even though they can educate families about the "art" in memorials, most families still don't think a monument builder company is the place to come for those products. To stimulate people to think of our profession more as art is a positive change Debbie and Mike would like to see happen.

So how does this change come about?

Debbie and Mike have based their business model around their philosophy that says monument builders can really do a variety of things. And the important message is that **"WE NEED TO START DOING DIFFERENT THINGS NOW!"** They are not the kind of people who will linger around for years just talking about it. For example, take a look at the photo of "Moon Glow," the marble disc fastened onto the millstone granite with aluminum rods. This is a great example of one way to offer a new shape and concept as a work of commemorative art, or as a work that ends up in a private collection or non-cemetery landscape. The more we can build and offer these ideas, the more expansive our world as monument builders will become.



Details from a three-piece project of shape-carved 1/2-in. glass.

Don't Take It All for Granite

One of the reasons Greeley Monument Works likes to incorporate other stone in projects is because it seems that many folks connect granite with "headstones." When engraving is done in the shop, especially lettering, however, Debbie and Mike always prefer granite for that portion of the piece—especially when it is being used as a memorial. In encouraging prospective clients to use a piece of "fine art" in a memorial—either a stone sculpture or bronze—Debbie and Mike want to create their part so that if the client would ever want to place the work in a cemetery setting in the future, all the materials would be acceptable to the various regulations. Because most of the regional cemeteries allow granite, marble or bronze, that gives Greeley Monument Works enough material of choice. If they are doing something that they know will never need to meet any public regulations, then they use other materials to "soften" the memorial for the eye of the purchasers.

In Colorado, there are some wonderful choices of local stone material: There is a nice Colorado rose red and buff sandstone. There is also a Colorado alabaster, but it is not a suitable medium for outside exposure in their extreme climate. People love stone they recognize. For example, the sandstones work well because many people use it in the landscape, so to add artwork to this medium enhances their plans.

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A Colorado Rose Sculpture pedestal is the base for "Home Town," a life-size bronze by George Lundeen. Lettered around the entire base are stories about the town of Loveland, CO.

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Greeley Monument Works is an inspiration for all of us and an example of how we can carve out a unique niche in this industry of providing quality products, new concepts, and custom work. As Debbie says, "What we all do to have a small business is hard work, frustrating. . . but if our goal is to be successful, even if it is just in creating jobs for ourselves, we need a vision. I do believe that giving 80 percent just isn't enough. We must give 100 percent, and to do that we need vision and a goal."

Getting the public to understand that we are much more than simple tombstone makers is what needs to be emphasized. It should become a mantra we repeat. This outreach is nothing new for our industry, but it is more critical now that the global market floodgates are opening wider and wider. It's essential that we continue to step beyond the box and offer new and innovative ideas if we want our business models to survive and prosper, and that means working smarter and more creatively. After all, our goal is to build great works of commemorative and personal art that contribute to our culture and that last for a long, long time. And the more innovative and creative we become, the stronger our industry will become. ■

About the Author

Dan Bellan, CM, of Dan Bellan Design, is originally from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He has been a resident of Vancouver, BC, for the past 20 years. A bi-monthly columnist, he's been a frequent contributor to the *MB News* and other well-known industry publications. Dan has a degree in chemical engineering, but the corporate world of engineering wasn't hands-on enough for him, so he came into the monument industry full time in 1994. An observant man who travels widely and keeps his mind open to new ideas, Dan promises to share new perspectives with readers.



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In the Greeley Monument Works shop (left to right) are Karen Seckler, Debbie Dalton, CM, AICA and Mike McBride, CM, AICA, standing in front of a Texas Limestone piece that Mike started at a recent carving workshop presented by Southwest Stoneworks in Riconada, NM.



"Joyful Lake" is a 4-ft tall pillar of Colorado rose red granite that was designed by Debbie Dalton, CM, AICA and carved by Mike McBride, CM, AICA.