

Life of sculptor will be depicted at SECCA

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

Frank Woods always thought the life of Edmonia Lewis, the first professional American sculptor of African descent, should be told. It's a story of a woman of mixed heritage who overcame barriers of racism and sexism, in the name of her talent and for the sake of her art form.

At last, her story will be told in the form of a play titled "Wildfire: Black Hands, White Marble."

Written by Linda Brown, retired professor from Bennett College, the play will chronicle the life and career of Lewis, daughter to a Native-American mother and African-American father, and the unbelievable obstacles she surpassed that subsequently paved the way for so many black artists to follow.

Born in New York, Lewis spent much of her younger years with her mother, who was a part of the Ojibwa nation. Her education and art training took her from Oberlin College to Rome, where she journeyed to learn and compete with some of the best neoclassical sculptors at the time.

Once Lewis met and befriended a group of American female artists, she quickly joined in their struggle to gain recognition and credibility, both of which she received as she went on to become a world renowned sculptor. Lewis' claim to fame occurred when her sculpture "The Death of Cleopatra" was exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposi-

tion in 1876.

Woods, director of the African-American studies program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, explained that the play grew out of his doctoral dissertation on Lewis and other pioneer African-American artists in the art world during the 19th century. The play is being produced thanks to a grant awarded by the N.C. Humanities Council.

Brown sat on the committee that reviewed Woods' dissertation and was always encouraged by him to turn Lewis' life into something more than a history lesson.

"I had, in the back of my mind, these stories as stories that need to be told and celebrated and certainly not forgotten," said Woods about Lewis' road to fame. "That's my purpose in life now — to have experiences brought back to life."

Both Woods and Lewis are hoping that the play will provide audiences with a window into this woman's real-life struggle and the lessons learned and created by her experience. With racism and sexism both issues alive and prevalent today, Woods feels Lewis' life is proof positive that societal con-

flicts with race and gender cannot cease the drive and spirit of anyone determined to reach a goal. Woods hopes those who watch the play will witness that solid determination in the portrayal of Edmonia Lewis.

"We're talking about very specific people (like Lewis and other black artists) who have the talent to compete with white contemporary artists, but have the resolve that nothing is going to stop them," Woods said.

Brown says she is amazed by both the talent and artistic strides in which Lewis made a "very prohibitive" art form, where tools and supplies like marble were very costly. Nonetheless, Brown says that Lewis' career speaks mountains of her courage and spirit.

"It's phenomenal. (Lewis) said, 'Yes I can' in 1865, and it is evidence of so much perseverance. It's hard to imagine but worth knowing about for everybody. She lived and did everything she said she was going to do."

Much of Lewis' story will focus on the racism and sexism she encountered — walls she ran into time and again — because Brown says those subjects are critical to include to accurately capture the essence of Lewis' achievements.

The play is free and open to the public, with performance times at 8 p.m. June 7-8 and 2 p.m. June 9 at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA).



Woods

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Photo by Courtney Gaillard

Elizabeth Mitchell, co-chair of the 2-1-1 committee, speaks at last week's news conference as Congressman Richard Burr looks on.

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questions or concerns as so many did during the previous anthrax outbreaks when 9-1-1 across America was inundated with callers who simply had questions.

Drago expressed his delight at the chance for the region to enact this national system on a local level ahead of the rest of the nation, saying, "We have benefited by having the vision and really putting ourselves out there and making the commitment, both politically and through some leadership by United Way of North Carolina and in the four communities, including right here in the Triad."

Dialing 2-1-1 will connect you to a call center at United Way of Greater Greensboro during daytime hours in the week and at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center in the evenings and on weekends.

United Way of North Carolina began mulling over the possibility of bringing the 2-1-1 system to the state three years ago. A task force made up of local United Ways was formed to submit an application for the 2-1-1 system to the N.C. Utilities Commission and after review, the commission awarded United Way of North Carolina as "holder" of the number in November 1999. The following year, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) designated 2-1-1 for the same purpose nationally after a request was made by United Way of America and the National Alliance for Information and Referral Systems.

According to Elizabeth Mitchell, co-chair of the local 2-1-1 Committee, every state in the country is working to establish the 2-1-1 hot line and North Carolina is the third state, following Georgia, and Connecticut. Mitchell hails from the United Way of the Triangle.

"North Carolinians can look at themselves as leaders in 2-1-1, and we certainly appreciate Congressman Burr's support in helping us to be that leadership in our community,"

Mitchell said.

United Way of North Carolina plans to work on making 2-1-1 accessible to residents throughout the state over the next 18 months, a system that

can serve as a model for neighboring cities and states across the country.

For more information, visit www.CallUnitedWay211.com.

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