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NEWS RELEASE

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DAVID PLEDGE'S GIANT CERAMIC POTS ADORN UM CAMPUS

**By Patia Stephens
University Relations**

MISSOULA--

A trio of striking ceramic vessels that grace The University of Montana campus are both a paean to the recuperative powers of art and a son's tribute to his father.

The three elegantly massive pots crafted by Great Falls native David Pledge are anchored on the lawn next to UM's new Skaggs Building, where they stand sentinel over students and other passersby, a visual respite in a landscape of brick and concrete and grass. With classical shapes, vibrant earthtones and whimsical markings, the salt-fired pots are round-bellied and tall as a woman, taller still -- 11 1/2 feet -- on their steel pedestals.

The pieces evolved out of Montana's Percent for Art program, which requires a fraction of the budget for state-funded buildings to be spent on public art. When the Montana Arts Council put out a call for submissions, Pledge had a vision.

He had just completed his master's thesis show, which included several large-scale pots.

"I got this mental image," Pledge said. "After my thesis exhibit, it seemed natural to increase the size further to a more architectural scale."

Pledge has a history of taking calculated risks. A 1983 graduate of Great Falls High School, he emerged from a youth he describes as "misguided" into the responsibilities of marriage, parenthood and work. In 1990, he enrolled in the art program at Montana State University in **Bozeman**, earning his degree in 1996. He then spent two intensive months as a resident artist at

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Helena's famed Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts before moving to Missoula to enroll in UM's master of fine arts program.

After years of working in various artistic media, he had found his calling in ceramics.

"Going to college changed my life," he said. "It turned my life around. Finding something to be passionate about really made a difference for me."

Still, he battled constant doubt. Was he wasting his time chasing art degrees? Would he be better off quitting school and working full time?

"Sometimes it seemed ridiculous -- I had a kid to support, bills to pay -- but then I'd sell a pot and it would reaffirm what I was doing. It's a vote of confidence."

His pots now are in collections across the country. One of his biggest fans is Maggie Mudd, director of UM's Museum of Fine Arts. Pledge pots from the museum's permanent collection adorn a number of UM offices.

"We have bought quite a few of his things," Mudd said. "He's immensely talented -- he has a feeling for clay and the wheel that is just remarkable. He has as refined an aesthetic as I've seen in a potter who throws in a traditional vein, and yet he does something that is not traditional.

"There's a congruence of materials and concept," she added. "His ideas and his ability to work the material are matched, which is really the definition of a masterwork. All of it works together to produce exquisite pieces."

Pledge's work has been shown at the Archie Bray Foundation and the Museum of the Rockies and will be in an upcoming exhibit at Missoula's Sutton West Gallery. Last year, his entry in the Strictly Functional Pottery National brought home the Best of Show award.

He humbly shares the credit with his mentors: Josh DeWeese, director of the Archie Bray Foundation; UM art faculty members Beth Lo and Stephen Connell; and UM Professor Emeritus Rudy Autio.

Earning his MFA degree in 1999, Pledge stuck around UM's art department in order to create the pieces for the Skaggs Building, which houses the School of Pharmacy and Allied Health

Sciences.

The committee that selected his work included the building's architect and pharmacy school administrators.

"It had broad public appeal," said Lori Morin, pharmacy assistant dean for student affairs. "We liked the fact that it was unique and different, and we had a small piece [of Pledge's] in our office that we liked."

After his proposal was selected, Pledge began the process of creating the enormous pieces, which pushed the limits of traditional pottery. He started by building custom "bats" -- circular trays that fit on a potter's wheel -- reinforced to hold 350 pounds of clay. He made the pots themselves in "coils," sections of clay carefully joined to one another. The pots were so heavy it took four men to move them.

"I tried to make them as large as I could and still fit them in the kiln," he said.

After the first firing -- in a soda kiln Pledge built while in school,-- the pots were glazed and fired again before being installed in spring 2000. They rest on rectangular steel pedestals, which were powder-coated for an enamel-like finish, and bolted into concrete slabs.

Reminiscent of Japanese temples, Chinese porcelains and Greek urns, the unusual sculptures are a captivating diversion from the backdrop of brick buildings and Mount Sentinel. Although he didn't plan the vessels' pharmaceutical symbolism or the way their colors perfectly complement their surroundings, he did envision their visual impact.

"Public art is a mental break," Pledge said. "You're walking along and it interrupts your thought process for a minute."

Reflecting on the installation, he said it is an honor to have his work so publicly displayed. And, he pointed out, it is another layer in his family history, since both his parents also graduated from UM. His mother, retired high school teacher Vivian Pledge, still lives in Great Falls, and his father, businessman W.J. "Bill" Pledge, died in 1990.

After his father's death and his own painful divorce, pottery became a refuge for Pledge.

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He threw himself into making pots, he said, and because it got him through a tough time, he felt he owed a debt to the field. With his majestic display at UM, perhaps that debt has now been repaid.

"If I had the option of dedicating it to someone, it would be my dad," he said. "He died before this project got going, but I thought about him a lot while I was working on it."

Pledge now is in the process of setting up a home studio in Missoula, where he plans to stay for at least a few more years, until his daughter, Ashley, graduates from high school. He pays the bills with a combination of art, cooking and landscaping jobs, and hopes he eventually will be able to focus full-time on pottery.

MFA Director Maggie Mudd awaits that day, too. "I really look forward to the future of David Pledge because I think he's only just scratched the surface of what he's going to be able to produce. Over time I think we're going to hear a lot about him."

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Local, Helena Independent Record, Bozeman Chronicle, Montana Arts Council, Archie Bray Foundation, Lively Times
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