

Engineer sculpts concrete proof of love for wife

By CRAIG PIECHURA

Charles Novacek doesn't take his wife for granite. However, he did make a likeness of her in limestone.

As a civil engineer for Barton-Malow, Novacek knows his way around a blueprint. And that's exactly the process he used to sculpt a 5-foot-4½-inch statue of his wife, Valentina.

"I approach a work of sculpture as an engineer," said Novacek. "I prepared sketches and plans that corresponded to exact one-to-one dimensions and worked from the drawings. I can't see how anyone in the modern world could use a live model for a sculpture. The model would have to stand there so many hours."

Back in December of 1976 Novacek decided he'd give his wife the gift of immortality for her 50th birthday. He ordered a 2,500 pound block of Indiana limestone that was delivered to his door the following summer.

Working nights and weekends using an electric and manual chisel, he would chip away at the stone which stands on a pedestal in his front yard on Maplewood in Southfield. His work was hidden by a plastic enclosure.

Now there are only four hours of finishing touches left — "like the teeth" — before the grand unveiling June 10. That date marks the 29th anniversary of the day Charles met Valentina at a riding school in Augsburg, Germany. They were both political refugees from Czechoslovakia living in Germany to escape the Russian Communists.

June 16 will be the first time Mrs. Novacek sees the statue. She's seen pictures of it on television news reports and in the newspaper, but never face-to-face.

"I'M WAITING until it is finished," Mrs. Novacek said. "If I looked at it beforehand, I might start telling him how to do the thing. This is my character; one of my idiosyncrasies."

As further proof of her belief in delayed gratification, there is still an unopened Christmas gift for Mrs. Novacek in the house.

Mr. Novacek respects his wife's wish by wrapping the statue up in heavy plastic. He says he isn't joking when he says he puts his women up on a pedestal for the world to admire. His wife was asked if it will be unnering to look out the front window and see her image in stone standing in the garden.

"I think every time I look at it I'll think of my husband's devotion to me," she said. "I never thought it would bother me. It's just very nice of my husband to do it. I asked him why he didn't make somebody much younger, like my daughter or my son. But he feels I'm closest to him." Several of Mrs. Novacek's women friends have told her their husbands are upset with her one-ton gift.

"Their husbands said 'We don't know what to give our wives now, we can't top Charley.' Anyone can give a fur coat, a ring, or some flowers, but how many husbands go as far as mine?"

ONE-UPSMANSHIP was not his intent, Novacek explains.

"When I began this project it was a private affair. But coming to the end, I started to like my work. I thought if the art community would recognize it, all the better."

The statue, which Novacek named "Barefoot," is his first work in stone. He has dabbled in painting over the years and confessor to a life-long dream of being an artist.

Because of his personal satisfaction and the favorable response he's received, Novacek plans to start work on another sculpture. This one will be a life-size reclining nude sculpture of his married daughter, Margarita, 27.

"It will go in the backyard and be made of white Vermont marble without a blemish," said the father-sculptor. "She's very excited about the pros-



The limestone likeness of Valentina Novacek peers out across her Southfield lawn. "Every time I look at it I'll think of my husband's devotion to me," she says. (Staff photos by Gary Friedman)

pect, although she went on a diet to be even more beautiful."

"That's where I'm comfortable and happy," he said. "Close to home, where I can stay with my family or in close vicinity."

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