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Local artist literally knows how to make money

December 18, 2013

By **Suzanne Pollak**

Senior Writer

Barton Rubenstein views the world through the flow of water and wind. His sculptures, which can be seen in front of area synagogues and the Washington DC Jewish Community Center, involve movement.

The Chevy Chase resident's years studying and working in science, love of sports and an urge to create things with his hands all merge into his large, revolving creations.

But for right now, the father of three's fame is directly related to a flat piece of paper — the \$100 bill. Rubinstein was part of a 14-member team of leading scientists who designed the recently released bill.

When contacted by the National Academies to see if he was interested in working on a redesign of U.S. paper currency, "I actually told her I wasn't, because I thought it would take too much time." He chuckled as he recalled being told it wouldn't take up that much of his time and then spending many hours, four times a year from 2005-2007, in meetings, taking tours of paper manufacturers and listening to lectures on counterfeiting.

His team went on to make about a dozen recommendations. In between, he worked in his studios, located in several garage-type buildings in the back of his home. Meanwhile, the government spent the next several years designing the \$100 bill and retooling the machines that make the money. He expects the other bills to appear more quickly now that the foundation has been set.

As he recalled the process, he leaned forward, pulled his wallet out of his pocket and displayed the new

Ben Franklin. He explained that what appears to be a hologram — the blue strip in the middle of the bill — can move up and down or left to right depending on how the bill is held.

"To you and me, people on the street, it appears to be a hologram. It's not actually a hologram. It's a form of it," he explained, adding it was extremely expensive to reproduce. However, he estimated that the cost to make a single \$100 bill, when produced in incredibly large amounts by the government, is only 14 cents.

Rubenstein said he was involved both in coming up with the blue stripe and the idea to use large numerals for the visually impaired.

While he learned a lot about currency, Rubenstein was happy to return to his full-time work on sculptures, spending upwards of a year on each one as he creates small versions of his idea, working with the raw materials as well as the people who commissioned the work.

He claims to have lots of ideas running around in his mind. "When the client comes in, I match them up. It's something that just comes out of nowhere, but it's the culmination of a life."

Rubenstein, 51, grew up in D.C. and attended Sidwell Friends School. He graduated from Haverford College, learning science but also minoring in lithography. "I always loved math and science," he said, adding that art goes "hand in hand" with sciences. His love for sports, especially tennis and basketball, also plays into his work.

Rubenstein spent the next six years in Israel doing research on how the brain recognizes objects at the prestigious Weizmann Institute of Science. He earned his master's and Ph.D. degrees there. While about 80 percent of his fellow students were Israelis, Rubenstein said that



Barton Rubenstein poses next to one of his sculptures in his backyard.
Photo by Suzanne Pollak

much of their communications were in English, science's international language.

When he returned to this area, he decided to take a year off before returning to a science career. He took some classes at Corcoran College of Art and Design in D.C., and well, there went his science career.

"I never really anticipated leaving science. I just like to work with my hands," he said. "I just decided to make my own sculptures. I made seven sculptures, I made my debut in 1994 and never looked back."

Many of his works can be viewed while driving in the D.C. area. His water sculpture is at the DCJCC. There is a new piece at Somerset Elementary School, his youngest child's school. And an outdoor one he calls Let It Flow is at 21st and L streets. Rubenstein also gifted a piece that sits outside the entrance to Adas Israel Congregation in D.C., where he is a fourth-generation congregant.

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