

NEWS

Chevy Chase sculptor takes familial approach to helping environment

By George Altshuler
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“Mother Earth” has many of the characteristics of a Barton Rubenstein sculpture: Its 14-foot size, its brushed finish and its graceful shape are reminiscent of sculptures Rubenstein has displayed around the country.

But this sculpture, which shows a face in profile, has significance beyond its artistic value. The sculpture will go on display in April on Earth Day in Washington's Navy Yard to acknowledge the United States' role in fighting climate

change. But more than that, this sculpture is different from Rubenstein's other work because it is part of a family affair.

Rubenstein, his wife Shereen, and his 14-, 18- and 20-year old children founded The Mother Earth Project, a multi-pronged initiative to raise awareness around environmental issues. The Chevy Chase family's most ambitious idea, which came from 14-year-old Ari, is to put a “Mother Earth” sculpture in the capital cities of countries that ratify the Paris Climate Accords.

They've reached out to 25 countries and are starting with the installation in Washington and one in Jerusalem in the



The Rubenstein family poses in front of the sculpture “Mother Earth,” which will go on display in Washington's Navy Yard in April.

Photo by George Altshuler

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spring or summer. Their project also includes an Instagram account that posts photos from people around the world who are helping the environment, a website that tracks which countries have ratified climate agreements, an initiative to raise environmental awareness in schools and a traveling inflatable booth.

Rubenstein said that they started the project after they felt that they weren't doing enough to help the environment by recycling at home and through a neighborhood compost program.

“We just felt like our impact in our house was so minuscule. We wanted to make a larger impact in our immediate

President-elect Donald Trump could complicate the plan if his administration decides to pull out of the climate pact. Still, he said that he would go ahead with the installation even if that happened.

“This dedication could be a very different type of dedication than I originally intended it to be [had Trump not won],” said Rubenstein. “It could become a powerful symbol for what our country truly is.”

Rubenstein opened the Instagram account this summer, but Sabrina Rubenstein, 18, took it over. She joked that there was a “transition” away from her dad's style of superimposing dialogue boxes on

The Rubensteins' project includes installing a sculpture in world capitals, an Instagram account that posts photos from people around the world who are helping the environment, a website that tracks which countries have ratified climate agreements, an initiative to raise environmental awareness in schools and a traveling inflatable booth.

community and then it grew into international projects,” said Rubenstein.

Rubenstein, who has sculptures on display at the Edlavitch DCJCC and Adas Israel Congregation in the District of Columbia and was on the artistic committee that redesigned the \$100 bill, received grants from the Washington Commission for the Arts and Humanities and the Capitol Waterfront Business Improvement District for the sculpture in Washington. He said that he is working on plans to display the sculpture on the Georgetown waterfront before April and that the Jerusalem sculpture will be placed in the Bloomfield Gardens in Jerusalem's Yemin Moshe neighborhood.

The family said they hope to find different funding models for installing the sculptures in various world capitals. Cameroon, they said, is close to agreeing to waive customs fees and pay for installation if the Rubensteins can raise money to build them a sculpture, for example.

While the family's original intent was to honor only countries that ratified the Paris agreement, Rubenstein said that

images to her more youth-friendly approach. The account has more than 2,000 followers.

She has received submissions from around the world, including from an Iranian woman who is protesting the construction of a pipeline near her home.

“Instagram is great for starting a conversation and giving voice to the average person,” she said.

Rubenstein, who is a fourth-generation member of Adas Israel Congregation and whose children had their b'nai mitzvah there, said that the family's Jewish identity and desire to help the environment are inseparable.

“Our project is not Jewishly motivated in the sense that we said to ourselves, ‘OK, let's do a tikkun olam project,’” he said. “But we live and breathe being Jewish. It would be foolish to say that this project is separate from our Jewish identities.” ■

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