

Talking to stone

Sculptors say rocks reply and tell them what to make

They're a strange bunch, these women who talk to stones.

They are in the basement workshop of Beloeil resident Heide Messing McDonald, 56.

She and two other members of the Association des Sculpteurs sur pierre de la Montérégie are going on about how they talk to stones.

The other two are sisters Sylvie Schoeb Godmaire, 42, and Danielle Schoeb Beaudoin, 4.

Yes, they actually talk to stones, say the women, who, along with other association members, are exhibiting some of their works in Saint-Basile this weekend.

What's more, the stones actually talk back, they say.

<It's quite a fantastic communication,> a smiling Schoeb Godmaire said. <It's like a higher message.>

The women, who have been sculpting together since they took a sculpting course under the same instructor in 1989, look at each other and laugh.

They know what they're saying sounds funny, but all three agree: that's how the process works.

They say they'll take a stone, a piece of pink or raspberry alabaster or, maybe, green soapstone. Maybe 30, 50 or 100 pounds.

It might come from Mexico or California, or from right here in Canada.

It doesn't look like anything special. It's rough and gray on the exterior, just one heavy mass.

But the women know that once they give the stone some smoothness and some shape, once they sand it down and polish it to bring out its colors and textures, this stone of thousands of years will have been transformed into something living, something magnificent.

But before that can happen, they first have to figure out what to make with it.

This can take a while.

<Danielle and I, we actually like to keep a few stones lying around the house, Schoeb Godmaire said.

Their children are instructed to <please walk around the stones, not on top of them.>

Seeing the stones every day helps, they say. But the real communication occurs when the sculptor <plays> with the stone.

She'll place it on the work counter, stare at it, ponder it, run her hands over it, note its contours, maybe scratch away at it a bit. She'll dab it with a wet sponge to bring out its colors.

And she'll ask it the question: <What do you want to be?>

The answer might take while, but eventually, in its special silent way, the stone talks.

<I want to be a cat> or <three heads on an elephant.>

<It's like someone is guiding you,> said Schoeb Godmaire, who got the triple-elephant answer a few weeks ago.

Her sister got the one about the cat. It now sits in her back garden, round and cuddly, like it loves to be there, admiring the flowers. Indeed, it's been known to end up with a pansy between its paws.

The women say they get so much pleasure out of sculpting, they want others to know what it's like.

In 1993, the three, and a handful of other who had studied together under Saint-Basile artist Jean-Pierre Neuveu, set up the Association des Sculpteurs sur pierre de la Montégérie.

They built a workshop in McDonald's basement and garage.

They bought a compressor and tools. Some of the work is done with pneumatic tools, and some is done with electric tools or hand tools.

Today, the association has about 30 members – mostly women but there are also a few men.

Sometimes they'll visit a quarry. And Tuesday evenings, they go to McDonald's to sculpt.

Working in each other's presence is <very motivating> McDonald said.

Sometimes members will share new techniques. But mostly, they just fill the air with creativity, McDonald said.

It's very energizing, Schoeb Beaudoin said. <When you go back home, you can't sleep.>

<And it's not because the coffee.>

The Association d4s Sculpteurs sur pierre de la Mont g rie will hold an exhibit at the Saint-Basile municipal library, 40 Savaria St., tomorrow, Saturday and Sunday.

The Association also offers sculpting courses. For information, call Messing McDonald at 467-4638.