



by Gregory S. Schneider

# Bronze Bust Unveiling Honors Hon. John M. Roll

Members of the Tucson community, including lawyers, judges, friends, and family of Judge John M. Roll, gathered at the federal courthouse in Tucson on Thursday, September 6, to witness the unveiling of a bronze bust commemorating his life and work. The product of over 18 months of organization, fundraising, and healing, the bronze sculpture proved to be a remarkable artistic achievement honoring a fallen hero. The unveiling was an emotional event for many, with hundreds of people gathered to share memories of a beloved father, husband, friend, and colleague.

The former chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona, John Roll was tragically slain in a shooting on January 8, 2011, during a “Congress on Your Corner” event hosted by Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) for her constituents. Chief Judge Roll, who was a friend of Representative Giffords, stopped by the event to say hi to the congresswoman and also to advocate for filling judicial vacancies in the Arizona District Court.

Chief Judge Roll was an esteemed member of the judiciary and the legal community in Arizona and enjoyed a long and distinguished career. He graduated in 1972 from the University of Arizona College of Law and later received his LLM from the University of Virginia School of Law in 1990. After law school, he began his legal career working as a court bailiff in Pima County Superior Court. He went on to work for the Pima County Attorney’s Office and in 1980 joined the U.S. Attorney’s Office as an assistant prosecutor. His work on the bench began in 1987 when he became a judge on the Arizona Court of Appeals. Four years later President George H.W. Bush nominated him to serve as a judge in the U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona. He was confirmed by the U.S. Senate and received his commission in November 1991. In 2006, Roll was elevated to chief judge, a position he served in until his untimely death.

Plans to create a permanent memorial began not long after Chief Judge Roll’s death. The Tucson Chapter of the FBA commissioned local artist Nicholas Burke to create a bronze bust of Chief Judge Roll to be installed in the Tucson federal courthouse. Creating the bust took months of preparation and required the tremendous artistic skills of a master artist. It also required the input of those who best remembered Chief Judge Roll. Because

Burke had never met the judge, he had to create the statue from photographs and memories of those who knew him. Burke brought a lifetime of experience to this process. He began his artistic career with a semester abroad studying under a master artist in Florence, Italy. After falling in love with sculpture there, he apprenticed under renowned American artist Paul Granlund before moving to Tucson and eventually opening his own studio.

The process of creating the bronze bust began with a clay original. Working in clay allowed for easy modification after receiving input from Chief Judge Roll’s family, friends, and colleagues. During a session at his studio, Burke modified the clay original as those who were closest to Judge Roll offered their feedback. When asked about modifying the clay original as family and friends observed

and gave their input, Burke said, “This wasn’t the first time I’ve done a statue this way, but the comments I received from Judge Roll’s family and friends were tremendously helpful. The room was full of love, and that went into the art.” Attorney Dee-Dee Samet, one of the founding members of the Tucson FBA Chapter, attended the studio sessions in which Burke modified the clay original. Samet was impressed with Burke’s artistic vision, including his ability to take “a simple statement like ‘the nose seems a bit large from this angle’ and translate it into a meaningful correction.”

After finalizing the clay original, Burke began the lengthy process of creating a bronze sculpture in the classical tradition of



The Memorial Bust of Chief Judge John M. Roll installed on the first floor of the Eve A. DeConcini U.S. Courthouse in Tucson.

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Artist Nicholas Burke modifies the clay original in real time as a committee of family, friends, and colleagues of Chief Judge Roll give feedback.

lost-wax casting. Burke began by making a plaster cast based on the clay original. The plaster cast allowed Burke to then create a hollow mold approximately an eighth of an inch thick. Once the mold was complete, Burke poured in the liquid bronze. Given the large size of the bust, it is not actually made of solid bronze. As Burke explained, “A solid bronze statue is impracticable for a number of reasons. Because the level of heat varies so much in that quantity of bronze, a solid sculpture would collapse in some

places but retain its shape in others.” He further explained that a hollow statue, on the other hand, retains its strength and shape and can therefore be quite large. The final bronze statue is one and one-third life size. Once the bronze solidified, Burke broke away the eggshell mold, revealing the bronze sculpture. He then buffed out slight imperfections that resulted from the mold and finally mounted the bronze on its base.

Upon viewing the bronze bust for the first time, the crowd at the unveiling was replete with murmurs of “astonishing,” “remarkable” and “uncanny resemblance of Chief Judge Roll.” The work of the Tucson Chapter of the FBA, the input from Chief Judge Roll’s family, friends, and colleagues in the creation of the memorial and the number of people present at the unveiling are a testament to Chief Judge Roll’s remarkable life and commitment to his community.

The Foundation of the FBA, the Tucson Chapter of the FBA, the Arizona District Court, and many private donors contributed to funding this permanent memorial to Chief Judge Roll. The bronze bust is now permanently installed in the Evo A. DeConcini Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Tucson, Arizona. Plans are underway to install a replica in the new John M. Roll federal courthouse in Yuma, Arizona. ☺

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