

The Gateway

601 College St., • Dr. Jim Diehr, Artist
by Eric Martin

There are very few pieces of art in Clarksville as steeped in symbolism as “The Gateway.” “The Gateway” is a sculpture created by Austin Peay State University professor of ceramics and sculpture, Dr. James Diehr. The statue was constructed during the summer of 1986 after being commissioned by then APSU President, Robert O’Riggs.

The statue, which was created as part of the 1986 Tennessee Homecoming Festival, sits exactly 86 feet inside the main entrance to APSU. It was made with concrete and Cor-Tin Steel which is a copper tin alloy.

Diehr’s inspiration for the statue has both historical and personal significance to the sculptor. After the piece was commissioned, Diehr spent an hour on a bench in front of Browning Hall writing down some of his ideas on education and the university. With Browning Hall as a backdrop, Diehr’s mind turned to thoughts of independence.

Browning Hall is designed after Independence Hall in Philadelphia. In addition, students are given independence through their education. This triggered a memory in Diehr’s mind of a “Christmas decoration that his family had when he was a child which was a half of a bell in profile and could be opened into a full round bell made of red paper created by expanding cells.”

The base of the statue is concrete slabs designed in the shape of books. The books symbolize a store house of knowledge. On top of the books is a bell-shaped, steel structure with the outline of a person carved out of the middle. The person, when looking in towards the university, symbolizes the students entering APSU to gain their education. When looking outwards from campus, the human figure represents the students of APSU going out into the world to get jobs with the benefit of their education.

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According to Diehr, “The figure is surrounded by a profile bell shape which has the dual meaning of representing moments of learning and liberty. At the top of the piece is a crucible shape with a flame that suggests learning and insight based on the mix of a liberal arts and science education.”

On either side of the bell is a ladder. The ladders represent how learning helps us rise above “frustrations and situations” and find solutions to problems. The center of the statue is embedded in concrete shaped like a keystone. Historically, like the keystone found in the center of a roman arch, it signifies strength and stability.

The statue was unveiled at a small ceremony in 1986. The ceremony was attended by local leaders, university administration and faculty. On either side of the bell is a ladder. The ladders represent how learning helps us rise above “frustrations and situations” and find solutions to problems. The center of the statue is embedded in concrete shaped like a keystone. Historically, like the keystone found in the center of a roman arch, it signifies strength and stability.

During the tornado of 2003, the statue sustained damage. The steel portion was pushed back to almost a 45-degree angle by the force of the wind. It took a week to complete the repairs on the statue, but it was restored to its original state.

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