



From far left: A Charleston family commissioned Clint Button to make a memorial after the death of their young daughter; a stone carved in 2008 contains five floral panels, plus two plain flat panels with a family's name on front and back; this Ecce Homo was installed in a small old cemetery in Maple Grove, Ky.



Like the chisel he uses to create figures from stone, sculptor **Clint Button** of Spartanburg County is carving out a national reputation

By LINDA CONLEY  
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**S**culptor Clint Button recently put the finishing touches on a large granite statue for a chapel at Florida's University of Tampa.

He worked on the sculpture with a Mobius band representing infinite faith on his parents' front lawn in the Boiling Springs community. The sculpture weighs between 8 to 10 tons and was lifted by a crane and taken to Florida.

The feature is part of a \$19.5 million project to build a non-denominational facility for the campus. A dedication for the project was held last month.

When visitors come to the chapel, the sculpture is one of the first elements to get their attention. School officials placed it in the middle of a meditation garden.

Button, 43, created the piece in honor of the couple donating money for the project. The memorial was carved from a huge block of stone and shaped into a work of art.

# Through **his** hands



Above, Clint Button works on a sculpture at his home in Boiling Springs. At top, Button created a Mobius band representing infinite faith that sits on top of a shell rock base for the University of Tampa in Florida.

PHOTOS BY TIM KIMZEY / TIM.KIMZEY@SHJ.COM

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**CLINT BUTTON,**  
on starting a piece of sculpture

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“My work is like being in a restaurant and you order a dish and the chef sends it out to you,” Button said. “Everything is usually prescribed, but sometimes people will just say they trust you to come up with something.”

The university contacted Button because he is one of only a few granite sculptors trained to do the work. Most of the older granite carvers have died, and not many are interested in taking their places.

Button became a granite sculptor after serving as an apprentice for a cousin in Barre, Vt.

Barre's stone-carving history goes back to the late 1800s and was passed down for generations. It has now become a dying art, but Button is doing everything he can to make sure that doesn't

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## BUTTON

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happen.

"I am probably the only one who does figurative granite work between here and Vermont," he said. "There are less than two dozen granite sculptors and even fewer studios. This is a responsibility. God is a lot smarter than me. He opened doors for me to do this work, and I am expected to do it."

Button opened his studio several years ago when he moved back to Spartanburg County. He named it after his daughter, Carolina, born weeks before the groundbreaking. Before starting his business, he worked as an apprentice for his cousin, master carver and stonecutter Andy Hebert, in the studio of a friend and master sculptor, Gary Sassi.

Button spent hours watching master sculptors to find out how to carve without leaving any tool

marks on the stone. When he perfected his skills, Button left the studio in Vermont and returned home.

"You are kicked out of the nest when you get as good as the master sculptors, so I left," Button said. "Gary told me I would have plenty of work because there are so few granite sculptors left."

### Local, national reputation

Just like the chisel he uses to create a figure from stone, Button has carved out a national reputation in the industry. He has a large sculpture of the Virgin Mary at a sanctuary in Lake Tahoe on the border of Nevada and California, a Mary and child statue in Birmingham, Ala., and worked on a large Union soldier statue with his cousin for a site in Salem, Ohio.

Button's local projects include a memorial stone for Hatcher Garden and Woodland Preserve's founder, Harold Hatcher.



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"Mary and Child" is a clay model for a bronze bas relief in a Lenox, Mass., church in honor of the patron's mother.

The stone was commissioned several years ago by the Spartanburg Men's Garden Club.

"Clint had fond memories of Mr. Hatcher and was anxious to use his artistic skills in creating the stone," said Henry Pittman, who served on the committee for the project. "It is a beautiful stone, and it will be there for hun-

dreds of years. We didn't have to pay full price for it because Clint made a substantial contribution. There was cooperation between the Garden Club and Clint."

Other commissioned works include a custom marble fireplace mantel for a homeowner in North Carolina.

Another area of his work involves making and restoring tombstones. One of his favorite projects involved replacing markers for a family in Texas. The memorials were damaged after a vehicle crashed into the cemetery, breaking the markers. The work was special for him because one of the markers was 100 years old. Button still has the damaged stones outside his studio.

"Working on projects like this is fascinating because these markers are part of history," he said. "I have kept them because of it."

A Charleston family commissioned him to

make a memorial after the death of a young daughter. The granite sculpture depicts a young girl hugging a dog.

"That was pretty hard for him to do because we have a young daughter," said Button's wife, Beth.

Every piece begins similarly, with Button smashing the stone and carving a figure, symbol or design. A great deal of creativity goes into the work, and it takes time to chisel away enough stone to see the sculpture emerge.

"You smash and tear it up to find what you are really looking for," Button said. "Once you find what you are looking for, you become a caretaker to make sure you don't mess it up. You want to make things when you can relax and see what is in front of you. If you can stop and see life, there is so much around us."

### Rooted in granite

It seemed natural for Button to take up the family business because he started carving when he was 6 years old. He remembers going to the woodshed or sawdust bin at his parents' home in Chelsea, Vt., to find something to carve.

"I bought my first knife for \$2.04 and promptly cut my finger on it," he said. "It was off to the races at that point. I love cutting things, and I love knives."

Through the years, Button has created letter openers with intricate carvings. He can make something out of almost anything. It doesn't have to be a piece of wood or stone.

"I have the scars on my fingers from my years of carving," he said. "My grandfather was a stone cutter, but he didn't want me to become a stone cutter. He wanted me to get an education and have a better life."

When he wasn't carving, Button spent most of his time working on his family's dairy farm. His parents moved the farm to Boiling Springs in 1980 but kept strong ties to their native Vermont.

Button grew up and pur-

sued a variety of careers before concentrating on granite sculpting. He worked as a dairy farmer, auctioneer and a vintage car and bike mechanic. He also earned a psychology degree from the University of South Carolina Spartanburg.

Sculpting didn't become his profession until after he spent time working as a chef. His love for knives and cutting things lured him into the kitchen.

He apprenticed at the Piedmont Club, finally getting a chance to make money doing what he loved by carving food and ice. He worked his way up to banquet chef before moving to New Orleans and working as a line cook at the Commander's Palace.

Sculpting became firmly planted in his mind after he visited family and friends in Vermont. He was between jobs and was unsure of what he really wanted to do.

"People started saying that I had always carved, so I should become a sculptor," Button said. "I took photos of my ice carvings and showed them to Gary Sassi and started working as an apprentice."

Since then, he has become an accomplished sculptor. He works part time as an instructor in the Culinary Arts Department at Spartanburg Community College.

Fate, it seems, led Button to become a granite sculptor, and he is glad it did. There were some stops along the way, but he eventually found his way back home.

"When I carve or sculpt a project in granite, I transition from being in total control to being totally subordinate and responsible for the care of what is revealed," he said.

"Beauty only remains if I do not make a mistake. Even years later, the best projects amaze me. It is often hard to comprehend that I was even there, much less that I was responsible for the work.

"I can only understand it as God working through my hands — I simply get to be there when it happens."