

Sculptor pays tribute to former city mayor

■ Glenside's Zenos Frudakis created the sculpture of Frank Rizzo now on display in Center City.

By Rhonda Hoffman
Staff Writer

You don't really know someone until you've walked in his shoes.

No one knows that better than Zenos Frudakis, a Glenside artist, who literally walked in the shoes of former Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo while he was working on a 10-foot bronze statue of the quintessential, larger-than-life local leader.

The Glenside artist, whose over life-size statue of Rizzo was dedicated on New Year's Day outside City Hall, actually walked in a pair of Rizzo's black leather shoes when he was creating their clay counterparts in his studio. The former mayor's blue suit jacket and tie also hang in his studio.

"The shoes were a little tight — they're a size 13," said the 6-foot-2 sculptor. "I had them on awhile, and then forgot I was wearing them. I wore them home and out to dinner that night," said Frudakis, who works in a carriage house studio behind the home he shares with his wife, Rosalie.

The impressive 2,000-pound statue faces the north side of City Hall, greeting viewers with one arm raised as he descends the stairs in front of the Municipal Services Building Plaza near the corner of 15th Street on John F. Kennedy Boulevard. The sculpture took five years to complete including several months to cast at Laran Bronze Foundry in Chester.

"I didn't want to put Rizzo on a pedestal. He was a man of the people. The image of him when he was running for reelection in 1991, the year he died at age 71, was of a friendlier, mellower man.

"I wanted this statue to reflect that," said Frudakis, who read a biography of Rizzo, subtitled "The Last Big Man in Big City America" by former Philadelphia Inquirer reporter S.A. Paolantonio in an attempt to get to know the man better.

Frudakis also reviewed several hundred photos of the big-city politician from Rizzo's family and

spoke extensively to his widow, Carmella, and his son, Frank Jr. The pose he selected for his sculpture was adapted from a photo of Rizzo waving to the crowd at the 1972 St. Patrick's Day Parade.

"When I create a sculpture I am creating a visual biography. I don't just want it to be a taxidermy piece. I want to convey what is behind the eyes, what is in the soul. That takes a large investment of time on the artist's part. It's more complicated than it first appears," said Frudakis, who has also created over life-size statues of golfers Bobby Jones and Arnold Palmer, which are both in the Golf Hall of Fame in Augusta, Ga.

Frudakis' work can be found throughout the world — at various locales in the United States as well as Japan and Africa. He is currently working on a bust of former Flyer Brian Propp which will be exhibited at the Philadelphia Flyers Hall of Fame.

Frudakis' bronze bas relief of former Philadelphia Mayor Richardson Dilworth is at Philadelphia International Airport and a life-size bas relief of the late entertainer Dinah Shore can be found at Mission Hills Country Club and Resort in Rancho Mirage, Calif.

Although Frudakis prefers creating from live models, many of his works are of the deceased.

"Sculpture is a rebellion against death. You create something that will outlive you and the relatives and friends of the person you're sculpting," said Frudakis, who met Rizzo only twice — the first time about 20 years ago at a political event at the Bellevue Stratford, the second time a few years later, at a sculpture show. Frudakis had extended an invitation to Rizzo to come to one of his shows and to the artist's delight, the politician responded.

The 47-year-old sculptor said he wanted to capture Rizzo's larger-than-life presence. And although naturally a statue can't move, the bronze rendering of Philadelphia's former top cop seems to take on a life of its own.

"Sculpture is a rebellion against death."

Glenside sculptor
Zenos Frudakis

A student of anatomy, philosophy and literature, Frudakis is a natural-born artist, although he did receive considerable formal training as well. It all started as a boy of five or six when his Greek mother handed him leftover dough from the bread or cookies she was baking. He fashioned small lifelike animals from the dough; she then would bake them in the oven and give them to her son.

Frudakis later received both bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. Yet, with all that training, Frudakis still feels like a student. "As an artist, you are constantly open to life, open to new experience, anything and everything can be incorporated into your art," he said. "And knowing what to exclude is just as important as knowing what to include."



Glenside sculptor Zenos Frudakis stands next to his most recent creation, a 10-foot bronze statue of former Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo, which faces the north side of City Hall.