

Michael A. Naranjo
1999 Outstanding Disabled Veteran

Through the Mind's Eye

By JIM HALL

The eyes ... the large almond shaped eyes of the enemy soldier were the last thing Michael A. Naranjo saw before he was plunged into eternal darkness ... eyes staring into his. He never saw the grenade land near his right hand, only the shattering explosion and darkness.

The Vietnam War ended for the young Santa Clara, New Mexico Pueblo Native American soldier that January day in 1968, and another journey began – a journey that with each determined step would lead Michael toward his life-long dream of becoming a sculptor and earn him the title, “The Artist Who Sees with His Hands.”

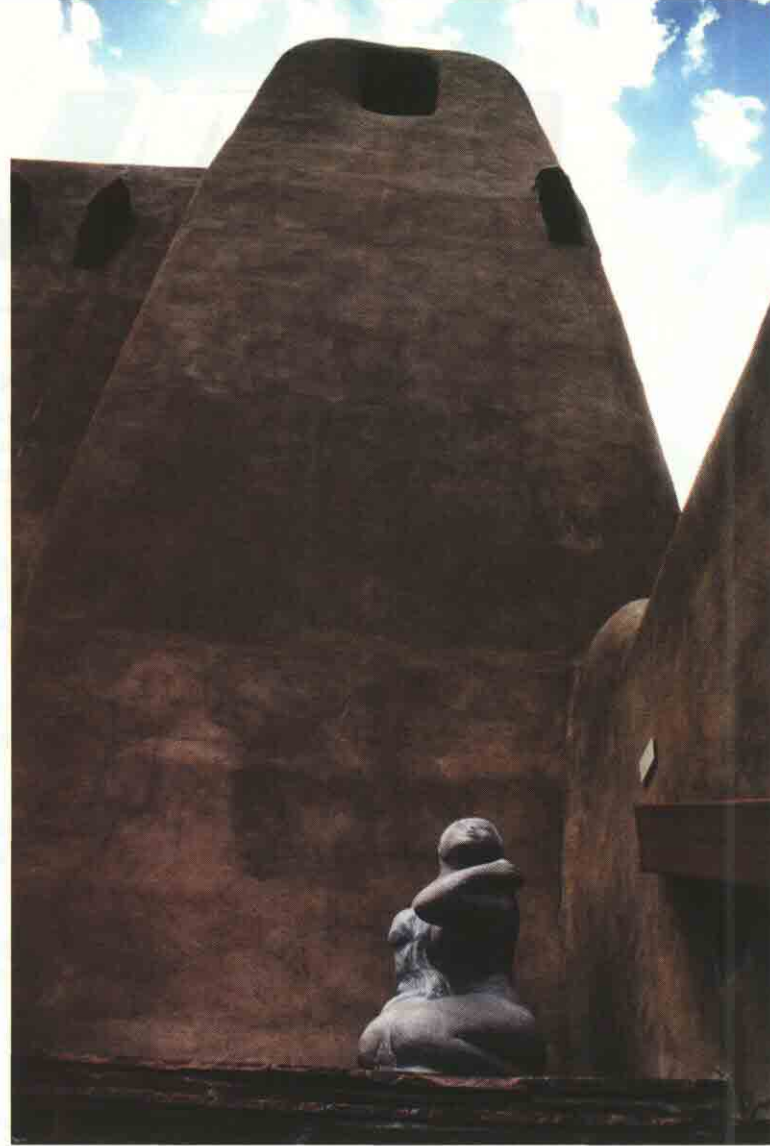
The same determination that goes into his art, his love of life and family, and his incredible example of achievement are among the qualities that led the DAV to name Michael Naranjo the 1999 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year. DAV National Commander Andrew A. Kistler will present the award to Mr. Naranjo, a member of Santa Fe DAV Chapter 15, during the opening session of the 78th National Convention of the DAV and Auxiliary in Orlando, Florida, August 21-25.

Watching Michael at work in his studio, one is fascinated and moved as he molds the dark wax. His fingers, pushing, pulling, bending, working form and emotion into the piece from which a mold is made to cast bronze sculptures. His creations grow from thoughts and memories transmitted to the wax through his fingers. As he works, Michael's soft voice unfolds his story.

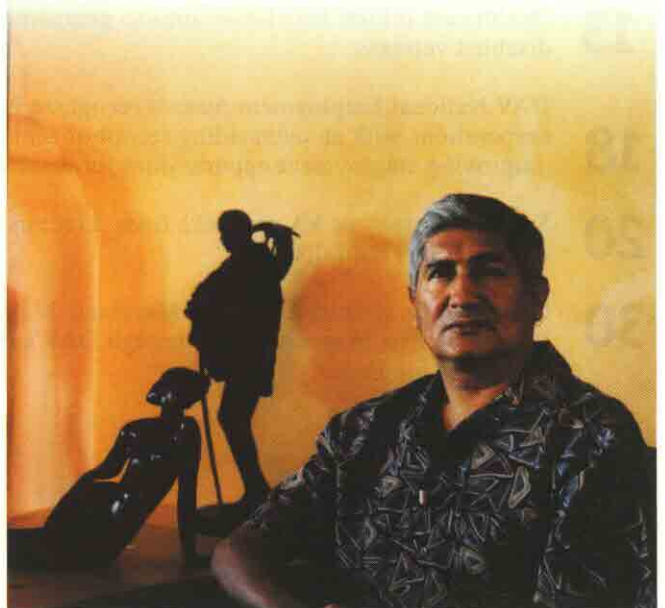
The member of a large family, his father was a minister and his mother a potter, Michael grew up on his tribal lands in northern New Mexico. He also spent summers living and working with friends in Texas. When he was a boy, Michael's mother gave him clay that he molded into small shapes, and he began to dream of becoming a sculptor.

Just as his mother's nurturing influenced him, so did nature. Michael and his brother, Tito, would wander in the foothills and mountains. There, in the natural beauty of the Southwest, he began to absorb every detail of his environment. The memories of those times alongside his brother are suspended in his mind, and he uses the memories often to help him create sculptures. Tito was also very good at sketching and taught his younger brother. But, mostly, the boys hunted and fished the mountains and streams tirelessly.

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Sculptor Michael A. Naranjo, 1999 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.



Mind's Eye

(Continued from page 1)

In June of 1967, the young man who dreamed of being a sculptor, who marveled at the power and beauty of a Michelangelo, was drafted into the U.S. Army. By November he was serving with the 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam. It was there following a night mortar attack on the division units at the Old French Fort, that Michael's unit went into the field to seek out the enemy attackers. After several helicopter insertions, they found the enemy.

As the unit slogged through a rice paddy that fateful afternoon, Viet Cong soldiers ambushed them. Michael and the sergeant in charge of his squad made it into the jungle at the edge of the rice paddy, and discovered Viet Cong firing on their platoon from concealed "spider holes." Michael, crawled forward into a depression and began returning fire, when an enemy soldier turned in one of the spider holes, and they looked into each other's eyes. As they stared at each other, Michael's world erupted and he was blinded from that time forward.

Luckily, his squad sergeant was able to drag Michael from the jungle, and he was evacuated to the 24th Evacuation Hospital, then on to the U. S. Army hospital in Tokyo for continued treatment, skin grafting, and rehabilitation. But, how do you rehabilitate a sculptor who has been blinded and has lost partial use of his right hand? His hands and eyes are his tools.

Lying sightless in the hospital bed in Tokyo with his hand bandaged and strapped down, Michael had all but given up his dream of being a sculptor, when a general's wife, volunteering at the hospital, stopped to ask if she could get him anything. Michael asked for some clay, and she brought it. He slowly rolled the clay with his left hand, shaping it into a small inchworm, and added tiny rounded bits of clay for eyes.

As soon as he'd made the inchworm, Michael knew his dream of being a sculptor was possible. He began to sculpt and mold other figures as he healed. And, like the tiny inchworm that steadfastly moves forward inch by inch, Michael's journey began again.

While undergoing additional skin grafts and surgery at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Denver, a photograph of Michael at work was taken and carried over the wire news service. It resulted in national attention, propelling him to work harder to make his dream of being a sculptor a reality.

After completing rehabilitation and mobility training at the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in Palo Alto, Calif., Michael returned home to New Mexico, and, in March 1969, conducted his first show of sculpted wax maquettes (small

wax figures) at the Albuquerque VA Medical Center (VAMC). He returned to the Albuquerque VAMC in the fall of 1970, but not for a show. It had become necessary to remove his remaining blinded eye, and seeing through the mind's eye became a permanent reality.

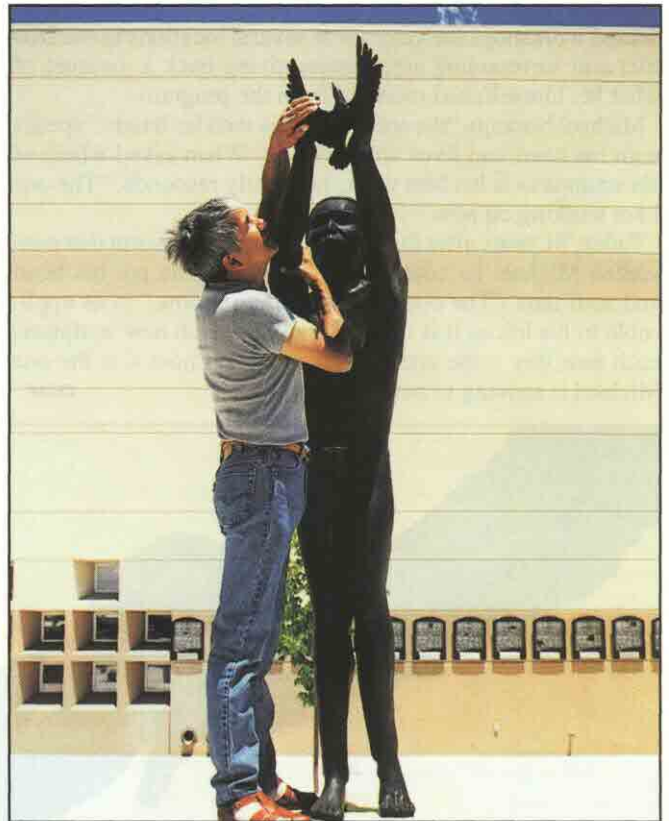
Continuing his sculpting, Michael presented President Richard M. Nixon with his piece "Dance of the Eagle" at the White House in 1971, and was appointed to the board of the New Mexico State Arts Commission. As his work gained recognition, so too did Michael. He was named the VA's Blind Veteran of the Year in 1973, and received the Outstanding Vietnam Veteran Award from President Jimmy Carter in 1979.

During the late 1970s, Michael also met the love of his life, his wife Laurie, who had moved to New Mexico from New York and was living next door to Michael's sister. Laurie soon became the most precious person in Michael's life, and they were married on April 29, 1978. The following year their first daughter, Jenna, joined the family, and two years later, their second daughter, Bryn, completed the family.

Michael's success continued through the 1980s. He found himself providing and participating in a growing number of workshops. From groups of elementary school children to workshops for other disabled veterans, Michael instills a love of art and imparts a confidence to succeed. Groups and individuals have also discovered Michael's ability to inspire and motivate others as a speaker. Some of Michael's favorite times are the workshops that provide an opportunity to work with children. Feeling and hearing the enthusiasm and fascination for art grow in them is extremely satisfying.



The Michael A. Naranjo family, from left, Michael; wife, Laurie, and daughters, Jenna and Bryn.



Michael A. Naranjo, the DAV 1999 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year, who sees his work by touching it, checks out his veterans sculpture, "The Gift," on display outside of the state library building in Santa Fe. Michael encourages others to feel, as well as look at his works.

Michael “sees” an object by touching it. In 1983, he traveled to Italy, where he had an audience with Pope John Paul II and was able to “see” some pieces by the sculptor he most admired, Michelangelo. And it was during a return trip to Italy in 1987 that another life-long dream came true for the sculptor. When he visited Florence, a scaffolding was erected that allowed Michael access to touch every detail of the 18-foot-high, marble masterpiece of the statue “David.”

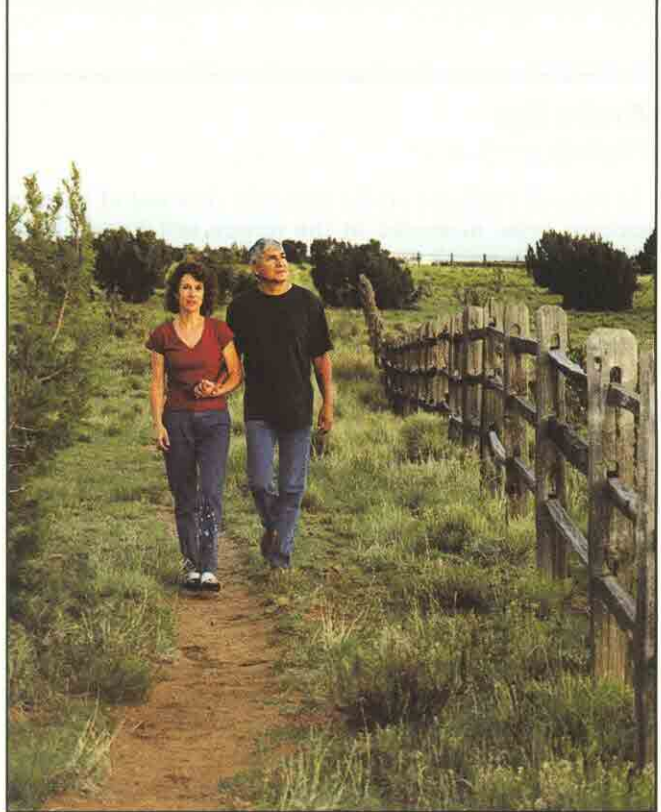
Michael entered the 1990s producing as many as four works a year, among them “Justice,” a life size sculpture commissioned by the General Services Administration for the Dennis Chavez Federal Building in Albuquerque, and “The Gift,” another life-size work commissioned for the Art in Public Places Program of New Mexico Arts. “The Gift,” which stands outside the state library building in Santa Fe, honors New Mexico veterans, living and deceased, who have served their country in war and peace. The dedication plaque mounted at the base of “The Gift” carries a quote from Michael that reflects the feelings of the artist, the veteran, and the man who is Michael Naranjo. It reads: “This project interested me in that I am a Vietnam Veteran. It was a challenge in that it seems that wars are caused by focusing on our differences; perhaps peace is maintained by realizing that it is our similarities which draw us together – we are all human and it is actually peace which all veterans strive for, regardless of the capacity in which they have served.”

During a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the Blind Rehabilitation Program, Michael returned to Washington, D.C., in July 1998 to represent the 25,000 blind veterans who have attended VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers. While there he conducted workshops for veterans at several locations in the District and surrounding area, again, giving back a measure of what he, himself, had received from the program.

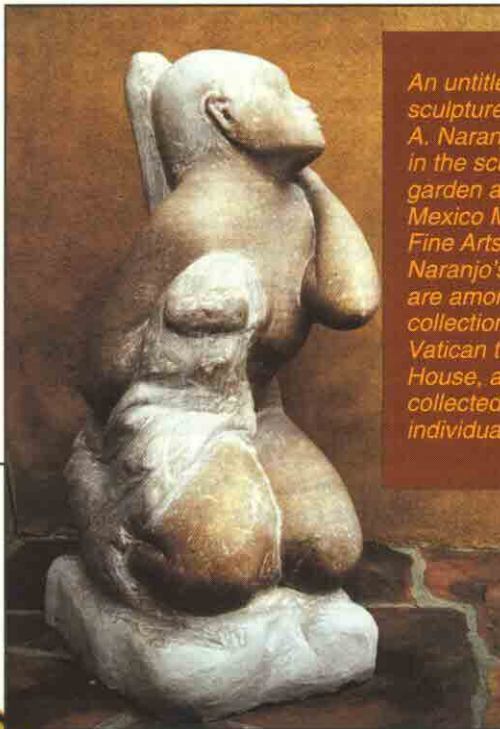
Michael Naranjo, “the artist who sees with his hands,” speaks with his heart and lives with his soul. When asked which of his sculptures is his best work, he quietly responds, “The one I am working on now.”

Today, 31 years after fashioning the tiny inchworm that convinced Michael he could achieve anything he put his heart and soul into, “The one I am working on now,” is as applicable to his life as it is to his work. Like each new sculpture, each new day – the one he is working on now – is the one Michael is striving to make his best.

DAV



Michael Naranjo and his wife, Laurie, share an evening stroll along a path bordering their property in Santa Fe, N.M.



An untitled granite sculpture by Michael A. Naranjo on display in the sculpture garden at the New Mexico Museum of Fine Arts. Mr. Naranjo's sculptures are among collections from the Vatican to the White House, as well as collected by individuals.



The warm, emotive detail of Michael Naranjo's work is depicted in this piece entitled, “Dance of the Eagle.” Mr. Naranjo, who was blinded and lost partial use of his right hand in combat during the Vietnam War, is the DAV's 1999 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.