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**Inside
Business**



'Ladder' sculptor hurt by removal

What in the world are they going to do with Ed Massey's work of art?

Ed Massey would like to know.

Massey is the New York sculptor who was commissioned by The Principal Financial Group of Des Moines to create "Corporate Ladder," an 18½-foot-tall sculpture, for a building owned by The Principal in Columbia, Md.

The company is yanking the sculpture in response to complaints from tenants who didn't like what they saw in "Corporate Ladder": A white businessman at the top booting the face of one of four people climbing the ladder. Struggling up the mid-to-lower rungs are a woman and a black man.

Some said it was offensive to women. Some said it was offensive to blacks. Some said it was offensive to business.

The Principal said "enough" and ordered it removed, although the company hasn't decided where to put the 700-pound piece.

That worries Massey.

"Whether or not the piece actually goes up, it's a very big concern of mine right now," Massey says. "The last thing any artist would want is to be censored on a piece and have it left in a storage facility.

"They own the piece," Massey notes, "so in a sense they're entitled to do what they like.

"I just felt they would have a little more backbone, at least hold the piece for a little longer time."

Massey says he worked seven days a week for 3½ months, "at times working with seven assistants," to complete "Corporate Ladder." The ladder was fabricated from aluminum. The figures are made of plaster with steel armatures that support them to the ladder.

It's pretty, but is it business?

"I feel so," he says. "It's an accurate depiction of the corporate struggle today — especially the imbalance of the structure, the hierarchy of the corporation today."

As for complaints about the lowly ladder-status of the woman and the black man, Massey says: "Twenty-five years ago there wouldn't have been any woman or anyone from any other ethnic background on the ladder."

Massey says he was surprised by the strong reaction to his work but points out he wasn't setting out to stir up a fuss when he created the sculpture. Officials at The Principal "knew exactly what they were getting."

In fact, he says, when he made his proposal to the company, he suggested four or five other sculptures that didn't involve any social commentary. However, "they wanted 'Corporate Ladder' from the very beginning. And I was happy to do it."

He adds, "I thought it was very daring that Principal wanted a piece like this for a corporate setting."

Too daring, apparently. Walter Walsh, vice president-corporate affairs for The Principal, says the sculpture will be taken down within 90 days or so. There's "some possibility we could find a home for it here" in one of the company's Des Moines buildings, he says.

Maybe Massey would like to buy it?

"Principal had asked me that, actually," says Massey. "Unfortunately, I can't afford to buy the piece back."