

## Twig Sculpture Underlines Ceramic Roots of Alfred University Campus

6/10/99

Alfred, NY -- For the next year or so, when visitors to the Alfred University campus raise their eyes to the hill next to Powell Campus Center, they'll see a group of giant pots made of big twigs. Adults may ask, "What are those things up on the hill?" But kids know instinctively what sculptor Patrick Dougherty has made -- or if they don't know its technical name, they know what it's for. "I like this one because you can go inside it," says Dougherty, and so do the kids, as you can tell if you let loose a swarm of preschoolers around the installation. AU Trustee Pamela Joseph's interest brought Dougherty and his work to the campus. "She's always been a supporter of my work," he explains. "She decided the University needed one of my sculptures and provided a limited grant." Because the work is so big, Dougherty, who came to campus from North Carolina and stayed three weeks, got help from some 50 Freshman Foundation students. They moved the scaffolding and helped him collect the wood. Most of the saplings are maple with a few dogwoods, all chosen for their red color. They were gathered from the area around the Jericho Hill soccer field, where loggers cleared a swath of timber three years ago. "When maple and dogwoods are cut, new saplings come up, and that's what I've used," says Dougherty, who likes to get his materials from the site where a sculpture will stand -- or at least from the same neighborhood. He compares his work with Ikebana, a type of landscape design that got its title from Japanese flower arranging, and with Japan's sacred gardens. "The maintenance of those gardens is incredible," he says. "Japan has temples where the grounds have been cared for every day for 1,000 years -- the sand raked into patterns, every leaf scrutinized." He also traces his work to his childhood, when he and his siblings played day after day in a cedar grove, and to the hours spent watching birds, which -- like Dougherty himself -- use twigs as their main building material. His outdoor work is also on display at Ann Arbor, MI, Madison, WI, the San Jose, CA, museum, the American Craft Museum in New York City, and the Frederick Meigher Garden in Grand Rapids, MI. After leaving Alfred, he planned to complete commissions in Raleigh, NC, and Vienna, Austria. "I work structurally first -- set the scaffolding around the uprights," he says. "With string, I pull the saplings into a shape I like, and then cut out the string. Next I work aesthetically, and finally, cosmetically." So why pots? "I usually get an idea during a visit to the site," he explains. "I've always been intrigued by clay. When I was young, I loved clay, but kept trying to make bigger and bigger things. And there's an affinity between clay and wood ... Also, in ancient history, people started building stick houses at the same time they were building clay pots." The clay for the first Neolithic pots came from the site," he says. "Working with clay and with saplings is similar; you're leaving your mark on the materials and the site." Some of his earlier work was abstract, but his recent work has been representational. Dougherty also likes building in public, where people can watch the work develop. When he begins, a spectator can't tell what the finished piece will look like. "The person who thinks I'm nuts -- who may even talk about calling the police on me -- gradually gets interested in the work, and in time, comes to believe in it," he says. "I like watching the process from doubt to support." He also likes the way people react to the sculptures. "Every year, people tell me thousands of tree stories," he says. "My work brings up memories, often pivotal ones, moments of connection to the natural world ... I also hear a lot of marriage stories, because people often get married in an arbor made of saplings." Anyone who would like to find out more about Dougherty or his work may reach him at 9007 Dodson's Crossroads, Chapel Hill, NC 27516; 919 967-6533; [stickwork@earthlink.com](mailto:stickwork@earthlink.com).