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Mother, son duo paint 'Creation' on ceiling, overcoming aches, fear

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Craning her neck up to survey the 26-foot-high dome above her, Gerri Buteyn knew this wasn't a project she'd undertake alone.

In early June, the 52-year-old oil painter from Brandon and son and fellow artist Jason Buteyn, 26, joined talents on a nearly four-week project that had them painting overhead 10 hours a day on a scissors scaffold.

The pair was commissioned to recreate Michelangelo Buonarroti's famous Sistine-Chapel piece, "The Creation of Adam." The impressive image will be the first thing to welcome guests to Oshkosh's new Renaissance Center, set to house the Renaissance Surgery Center, Renaissance MediSpa and Fox Valley Plastic Surgery upon completion this year.

"One of the things that they wanted to do is set the tone an atmosphere for the building," Gerri Buteyn said.

A retired art teacher, Buteyn began working as a professional artist in 2002. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven, it was wonderful," she said. In fall 2006, local interior designer LaDonna Sonntag approached her about the new Renaissance Center project.

"I was like, 'Yeah, I can do that,'" she said. "Then afterward I started thinking about the '26 feet up in the air' part. I always had a fear of heights."

Together, the mother-son duo starting planning how to go about painting the fiberglass dome. Work began with a two-day jaunt at scrawling an inscription around the outside of it, using vinyl stencils to perfectly place each letter.

The daunting task of painting at high altitude was just a small part of what often times proved difficult.

"It's kind of been hard on my back and arms," said Jason Buteyn, of Waupun, who attended Illinois' Institute of Art in Schaumburg and relishes time away from his construction job when he can get creative with a brush. "Especially since my mom's a little bit shorter than me ... I'm a little bit more bent over."

Mom Gerri added when they started the painting, it was more of an up and down movement. But as they got further into it, "it was more physically challenging with the neck and arm muscles."

All in all, the process went smoother than either had imagined and took about 180 hours to finish the project. What boggles their minds is when the duo stops to ponder on how Michelangelo did this 500 years earlier, likely without the technological ease of a scaffold. "We can't imagine how he did it initially," Gerri Buteyn said.

But the artists followed a process Michelangelo likely did, as well – drawing it on paper, perforating the lines and transferring the design with charcoal dust.

"The Creation of Adam" is by far the largest but not the only project the Buteyns have collaborated on. The first was in a hallway at Central Wisconsin Christian High School.

"If we do get an opportunity, I'd do it again," Jason Buteyn said of working with mom Gerri. "She's a lot better of an artist than I am, so I can learn a lot from her."