

Tombstones: monuments to skilled workers

By Coimbra Maher

Except, for her long, feline nails that she paints a suitably somber grey, there isn't much about Cherie Smith that suggests her profession.

With her blond hair pulled back in a topknot that sets off her elfin face, Ms. Smith, 30, looks more like the ballerina she used to be than the owner and manager of a tombstone shop.

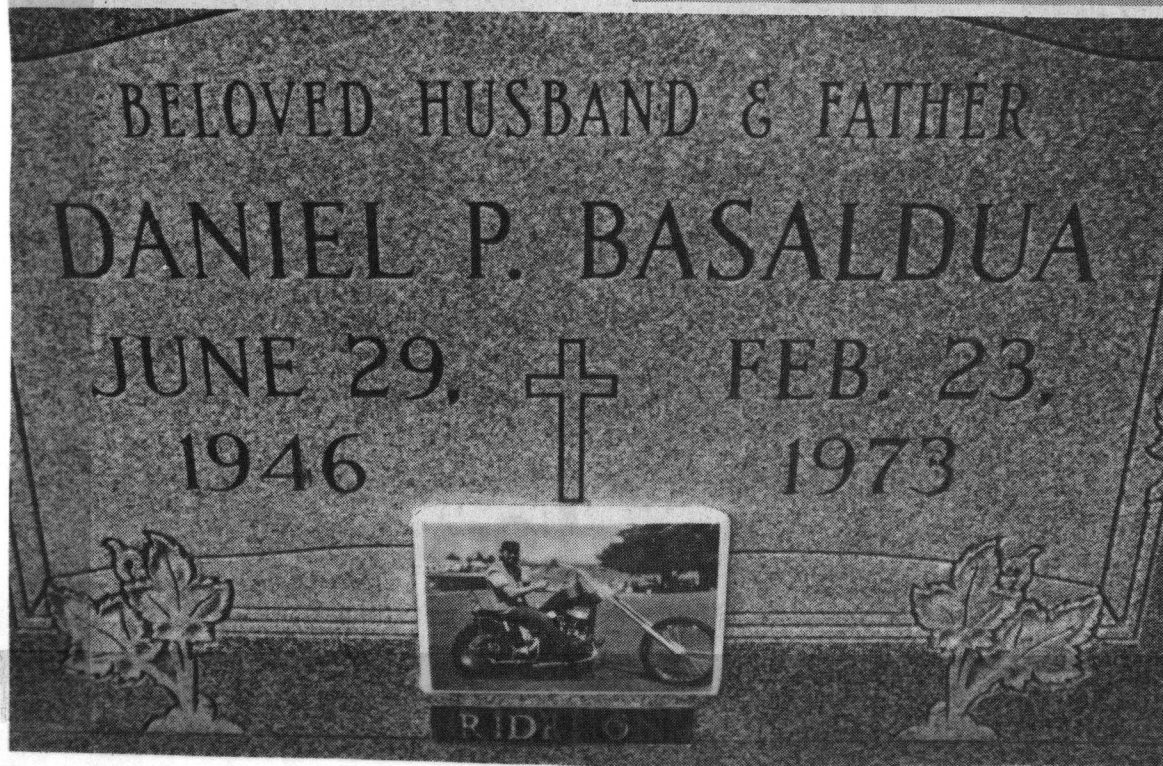
"Usually I'm called a secretary, or people want to talk to the man in charge," Ms. Smith said. "It's the usual thing, you know, 'What's a nice girl like you ...'"

Smith's Monument Shop sits on Freedom Boulevard, sandwiched between Gurley's Doll Shop and the Mid-Valley Janitorial Supply Company. The white, two-storied building seems put together in a haphazard way — subject to the whims of time and Marvin Smith, Cherie's father and founder of the family business.

As the family and the business grew, he

tore down the original house and built a structure that suited his needs. A workroom here, a house there and a practice room where his only child could execute her pirouettes.

Ms. Smith took over what is now the only tombstone shop in Santa Cruz County when her father died four years ago.



"He wanted me to do it real bad," she said. "But when he said, 'The more I think about it — you're going to get a lot of resistance. Are you sure you want to put up with the crap?'"

Ms. Smith accepted the challenge. Today, she runs the business with the help of stone workers Wendolyn Hanson and Nick Hantzis.

Marvin Smith started out as a hairdresser. In the early 50s, he and his wife Pauline moved their salon into the room that later became their daughter's ballet studio and now houses the "monument design shop" where Hanson, 52, prepares the stones for sandblasting.

Smith began making headstones, fireplaces and bathroom vanities when he found that he preferred working with marble and granite than with the pampered hair of the local housewives.

"He said he couldn't handle listening to women talking about their apple pie and how many children they had," recalled Hanson, a lanky, gentle-looking man. "So he'd only cut hair on Fridays and Saturdays."

The room where Hanson works still holds the memories of past lives.

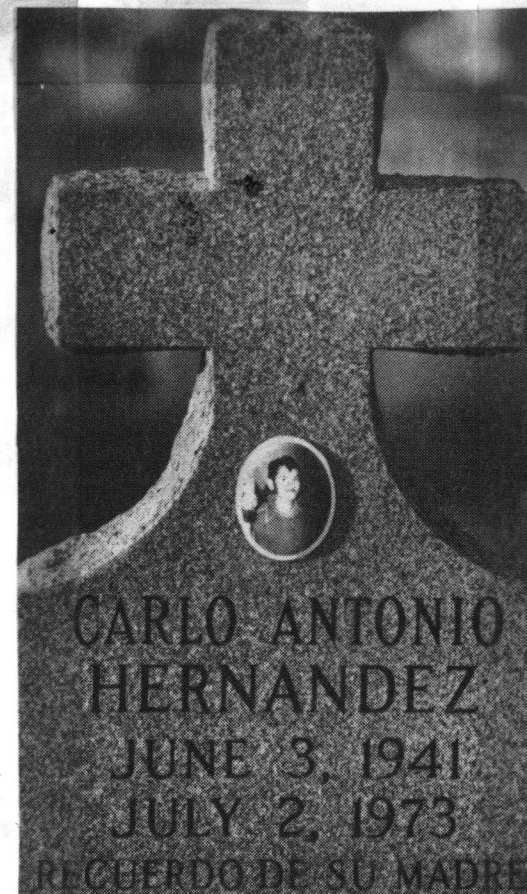
Full-length mirrors and ballet bars encircle the roomful of half-finished headstones. In one corner, an Alhambra water cooler and a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary rise up from a mass of boxes and well-worn wooden armchairs. An old upright piano stands guard at the entrance to the room.

Hanson, who has worked for the Smiths for over 28 years, carves the names and dates out of the rubber that protects the granite stone from the sandblaster — the modern day chisel.

As he works, he seems to cradle the marker in his long arms.

On a day in late November, the stones he was working on noted sadly short lifespans: Jan. 8, 1945 — Aug. 16, 1983 and Nov. 28, 1966 — Oct. 12, 1983.

"I never ask anyone how they died, and I usually need a calculator to figure everything out," said Ms. Smith, referring to the second marker, "But I looked at the date and I said, 'Gee, that girl is young.'"



Photos by Curt Ellisor

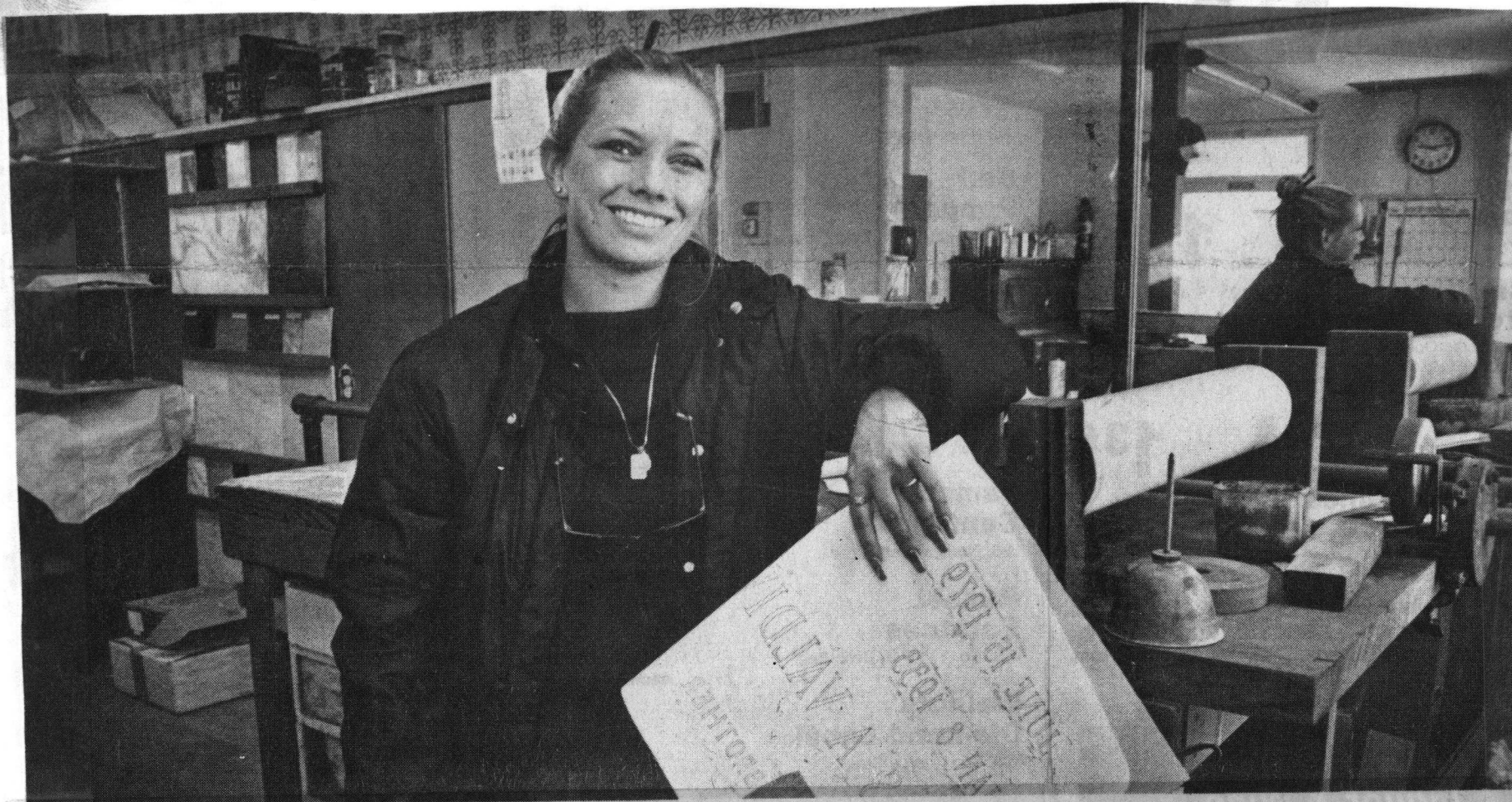
Although people seem shocked to find the attractive, garrulous Ms. Smith in a profession so closely associated with death, the young woman slipped easily from the role of ballet teacher to manager of the monument shop. After all, she grew up around the headstones and marble dust, and a cemetery is familiar ground to her.

"I'll just run across the stones and look back and see people trying to walk carefully between them," Smith said, gracefully imitating a tightrope walk between imaginary grave markers.

But, she still has difficulty dealing with the sorrow of the bereaved families.

"Some people will come in and cry for 45 minutes. Then they say, 'Oh, I feel so much better,' and I say, 'Oh, bummer,'" and Ms. Smith dramatized her emotion with a sweeping gesture towards the floor.

Industry of history



Cherie Smith, proprietor of Smith's Monument Shop, in the design room where tombstones take shape.

And once in a while she gets a grim reminder of her own mortality.

"How do you think I felt when I saw this," Ms. Smith said, pointing to an engraved tombstone. "This is my first name — same spelling and everything."

In a sense, however, there is a feeling of immortality to Smith's Monument Shop. Ms. Smith estimates that the old mining carts that serve as Hanson's work tables are over one hundred years old. Her father inherited them when he bought out a "Mr. O'Brian" in 1946.

"A lot of the things in this business are old and seem to last forever," Ms. Smith said.

She thought her father would live forever, too.

"If someone had told me five years ago that I would be doing this, I would have laughed.

"But, I feel that by keeping this going, I'm keeping his trip happening and developing my niche, too."

As she talks, the two chopsticks that hold her topnot in place punctuate the air like exclamation marks, and her warm, green eyes sparkle with the look of a woman who enjoys life.

She laughed when she was asked whether she thought her shop funereal enough for a business that deals with death.

"We're not going for the velvet curtains and the candelabra in the corner.

"Up in the city the monument shop owners have on these spiffy, three-piece suits and vitalis in the hair.

"My Dad always said, 'This is hard work and it's dirty work, so we may as well show it.'"