By Todd Zolecki

It had to be as big as the man himself.

No, bigger.

It certainly did not take long for Jonathan Mandell to figure out that much. Mandell, who lives in Bala Cynwyd, is a Wilt Chamberlain fan. More important, he is an accomplished artist. So when he decided to memorialize the Philadelphia basketball legend with a mosaic at Overbrook High School, from which Chamberlain graduated in 1955, he wondered which way to go.

Go small?

Or go large, like Chamberlain himself?

Mandell went large. It seemed to make the most sense. Mandell recently finished the 8-foot by 3-foot mosaic of Chamberlain, who died two years ago, to be erected in the school auditorium sometime in the near future. A dedication ceremony is planned, although the time and date have not yet been determined because Chamberlain’s family wants to be there.

“I was always very awestruck by Wilt,” said Mandell, 39, who graduated from Lower Merion High School in 1980 and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania. “Little by little, it just built up in me that it was something I wanted to do.

“I wanted it to be a positive role-model piece for the current student body to enjoy. Wilt was somebody who succeeded through hard work and sacrifice. He made something of himself. There are plenty of Overbrook alumni who have achieved that, but I think he’s the one that would speak to the student body.”

Mandell, who has mosaics all over the city and country-those locally include Delaware Valley College, Gratz College, the Liberty Museum, the National Museum of American Jewish History, and the Untied Way-completed the project last month, but said he had the idea long before that. He finally decided on it after he read an essay last year by a student at Adath Israel in Merion, where his 12-year-old son Ian attended Sunday school.

In a time when students might write about Kobe Bryant, Allen Iverson, and Donovan McNabb-current sports stars-the student wrote about Chamberlain, whom he had never seen play.

“It lit a fire for me,” Mandell said. “I really felt Overbrook needed to have something. I wanted the focus to be on where he started. A Philadelphia thing.”

An Overbrook thing, really. Last year, Mandell contacted Overbrook, which the state historical society recently made a historic site because Chamberlain went there, about his idea. School officials loved it.

“This is a living memorial,” Overbrook principal Yvonne Jones said. “It’s great that he has made this for us, to put his time and energy into it.”

The mosaic, which was influenced by famous Harlem renaissance artist William H. Johnson and is titled “Wilt Chamberlain as a Young Man,” depicts chamberlain in an Overbrook uniform as he goes over a defender and makes a lay-up. The stands are filled with fans.

Mandell looked for images of Chamberlain on the Internet and put together a paper composition on the panel before he started.

He showed it to Overbrook officials and Chamberlain’s family.

They liked it.

“It evolved,” Mandell said. “It was enjoyable on several levels. For one, I got to fulfill this mandate of being able to memorialize him at Overbrook. I like the sports themes, and the interactive quality of sports and how it draws you into it.

“I wanted to hit that point where he first hit the spotlight locally before he went to Kansas and thereafter.”

Mandell’s Wilt is not the Wilt of the NBA, not the Wilt who lived in Los Angeles, not even entirely Wilt the Athlete.

“Part of it was sports. Part of it was Philadelphia. Part of it was Overbrook,” Mandell said of his idea for the project. “All of these things came into play. Wilt has staying power. He’s timeless.”

Barbara Lewis, one of Chamberlain’s sisters, said she is honored that Mandell honored her brother in such a way.

“Overbrook was such a big deal for him,” she said. “Wilt said that was the happiest time of his life.”

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