

The Huntsville-Madison County Veterans Memorial

A hard-fought focal point is due to a small group of citizens and recognizes thousands more

by JENNY ADAMS



Proud. Intense. Larger-than-life. Sacred. Committed. These words apply to the men and women of the Armed Forces, active and veteran, around America. In Huntsville and the surrounding towns of Madison County, they also apply to the city's cherished and hard-fought landmark—The Huntsville-Madison County Veterans Memorial.

The Huntsville-Madison County Veterans Memorial is the pride of a small group of concerned citizens and local veterans who, way back in 1999, lamented that there wasn't a larger tribute to the military presence in the community. They formed an official volunteer committee around 2000 and got their nonprofit designation in 2001 as the Huntsville-Madison County Veterans Foundation.

Today, that dream has largely been realized entirely with private funding and donations. It's now in phase four of building and it's become one of the city's proudest attractions, a place of both intense reflection and fond remembrance. Every year on Veterans Day, it's a gathering spot for tens-of-thousands.

The Huntsville-Madison County Veterans Memorial now occupies the space formerly known as Gateway Park. It features reflection fountains, black granite conflict markers, a series of inspirational tribute statues depicting battle scenes, flags at full staff and even a time capsule for future generations. Those visiting Huntsville need not seek it out. The amazing architecture is virtually impossible to miss.

"We wanted people driving by to immediately know that this is a military memorial," says retired Brigadier General and co-chairman of the Veterans Memorial Foundation, Bob Drolet. "We wanted it to be obvious, symbolic, inspiring and personal. This was the perfect location, because you drive past it both entering and leaving the city of Huntsville."

Needing nearly \$4 million dollars to fund their dream, the group began jumping one hurdle after another. Everyone was a volunteer and most had full-time jobs, but they were not to be deterred in bringing Alabama's veterans the park and tribute they deserved.

"The first thing we did was to go to the city council and make our presentation," recalls the original chairman now retired Bill Stender. "We started as early as 2003, working with the city, and they gave us a premiere piece of land. With so many incredible men and women in the area having

PHOTO: JEFF SCHREIER



Ribbon Cutting Ceremony (left to right): Chairman, Madison County Commission, Mike Gillespie, Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army John Rogers, Command Sergeant Major Larry Turner, Lieutenant General Richard Formica, Bill Stender, Bob Drolet, Major General Jim Rogers, Command Sergeant Major Todd Glidewell, Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle



Sculptor DW Burch



Aviator statue dedicated on Veterans Day 2015

served, we felt it was important to have a place that honored that commitment to service and recognized all they had sacrificed.

“A competition was hosted for a design, and six companies turned in proposals. “We knew the winner immediately,” Stender says. “It was one of those instant moments.”

The man with the winning design was Martin Sisson of Chapman Sisson Architects.

For Martin Sisson, the project was inspiring and close to home. “My brother was active duty,” he says, “and I have followed his career and have great affinity for what the men and women of the service do. For our city and our county, there is a tremendous military presence and pride. It’s part and parcel of what we do here.”

Sisson wanted the scale to be significant and immediately recognizable. “We used sacred sizing, based off sacred geometry,” he continues. “It’s rare now to drive past this memorial now and not see someone there contemplating, thinking, looking

and observing. The arrangement of granite and concrete can become so meaningful. We started with a timeline of the conflicts and then the branches of military.”

The center is a pentagon-shaped arrangement of flags, including the flags of each branch of the military, a P.O.W. flag and the American flag. The latter was a point-of-pride so important, the group decided to increase the size. It now stands as the highest flag in Madison County, and it can be seen waving from virtually anywhere in the city.

Conflict markers were carved out of black granite and there’s a water feature running around the entire memorial. “The sound isolates you,” continues Sisson. “As you see the names of those who’ve lost their lives from the local community, you see your own reflection in the granite and hear water running. The rest of what’s around you drowns out.”

Nothing would have drowned out the crowd on November 11, 2011 when the

park reopened officially as the memorial site. Thousands turned out to show their appreciation for the hard work of these volunteers.

The memorial also debuted incredible artwork in the form of statues sculpted by local artist DW Burch of Meridian Arts in Gurley, Alabama. Burch made sure the figures were 40 percent larger than the humans they depicted, for impact.

“It was really inspirational working with the board,” says Burch of his creative process. “There was a criteria that they wanted to work in, beginning with WWI and ending with the first Gulf War,” he continues. “That was the timeline. The size of the space was another consideration. We want to convey the message of several ideals. The first concept was Sacrifice.”

Burch sculpted three soldiers with two

PHOTO: (LEFT) JEFF WHITE;



The Eternal Flame was placed in remembrance of all who died in combat, were imprisoned or remain missing in action. It burns continuously

forward pulling a third to safety. For the second ideal of Courage, he mimicked the same size and footprint of the Sacrifice statue, but this time the remembrance realized was conveyed by two men charging forward and one emerging bravely from a trench behind them. Adding an emotional aspect to these bronze pieces, each is a real-life past moment experienced by a local veteran. One by one, they sat with Burch and the rest of the committee to recount their own stories.

The memorial park is open at all times and the design is meant to speak to all ages. Inspiring a sense of service and a respect for the sacrifice of veterans in younger generations was a focal point. The board decided to add a time capsule to the memorial. It will be opened 50 years from the inaugural park dedication in 2062.

“That portion of the project turned out to be more complicated than we had ever dreamed,” says Drolet. “We had to figure out how to build something that would last

PHOTOS: (LEFT) JEFF WHITE; (RIGHT) BRENT BOYD



Every Brick Tells a Story

The park also features community support in a very unique way. You can walk along a pathway that is built from personalized bricks. Families and veterans are able to purchase bricks to help fund the park’s various phases, statues and features. Please consider lending your support by purchasing a brick paver. See hmcvm.org for details.

build and repeat.”

“We wanted statues that represent history,” offers Pete Schofield, project manager and foundation board member. “Four statues are being worked on now. These will include an aviator statue, a battlefield cross with a pair of boots, a rifle and a helmet and a third dedicated to and depicting wounded warriors and first responders.”

These will all be modeled again on people who’ve lived through actual situations, who currently live in the area.

“On a hill on the other side, looking down, will be a family statue of a mother, two children and a dog,” continues Schofield. “We want to recognize that the family is such a crucial part of the military.”

When asked about the best time to visit the Veterans Memorial Park, there was an eager agreement among all the board members past and present that autumn’s technicolor leaves set a backdrop untouchable by the other months of the year. Anchored in that natural beauty is the significance of Veterans Day, when the park welcomes Alabama’s second largest parade and crowds in the thousands.

“As you are entering Huntsville, you can’t help but be struck by the scope and placement of the memorial,” concludes Martin Sisson. “The symmetry, symbolism, reverence and emotions we wanted to convey in it all came together. I would say that this site is a real keystone for the city, and I know we are all excited for its continued growth.”