

Escondido veteran's tribute goes full circle



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Escondido — At 11 a.m. on Veteran's Day, hundreds of people will gather as they have for years in Escondido's Grape Day Park in front of the Wall of Courage and three life size bronze statues titled "Past, Present and Future."

This year will be different, however, because after nearly a decade, those who created the city's striking memorial will have finally completed the project.

The last of the tiles that line the Wall have been sold, the loan to build the memorial has been paid off, and the volunteers who have overseen the project since its inception have

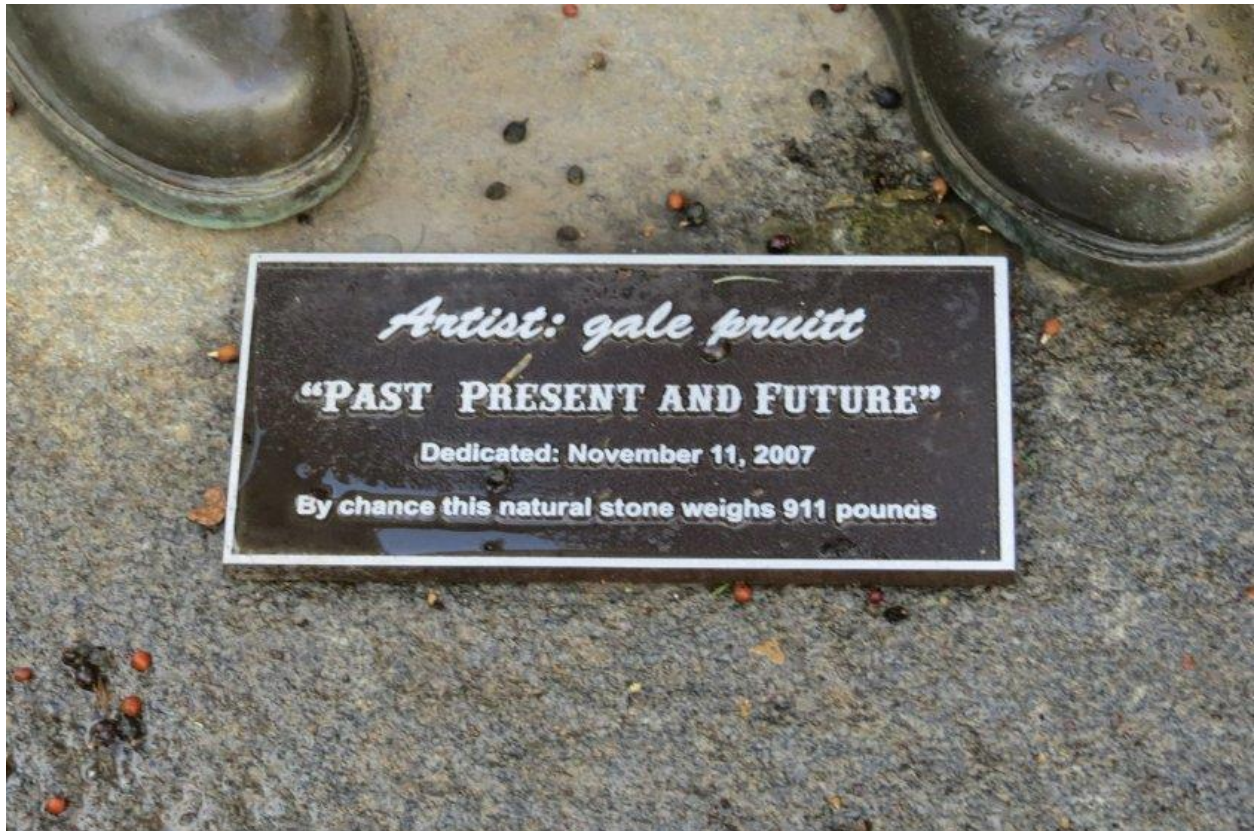
gifted it to the city. A local Veterans of Foreign Wars post has agreed to take over routine maintenance.



For organizers like Gale Pruitt, the artist who created the bronze statues, letting go of the work is welcome but also bittersweet.

“I feel sad. ... It’s like one of my children,” she said, of the memorial. “But they’ll take good care of her.”

It was in 2006 when some Escondido elementary school students, during a lesson on patriotism, suggested some sort of permanent memorial should be built in the city. The idea grew and a group of Escondido residents formed the Military Tribute Committee to create something that would honor not just vets who died protecting the country, but all military veterans.



The city enthusiastically agreed the project could be built in Grape Day Park – north of City Hall, east of the Performing Arts Center and just west of the train depot – but made clear that organizers would be responsible for all the costs and maintenance.

“We figured it would take us one year, maybe two” to finish the entire effort, said Marty Tiedeman, who has been in charge of public relations for the project since it began.

“This is our ninth year.”

A design was agreed upon and accepted by the city. It was composed of three walls that would hold small tiles purchased by donors, to honor specific veterans. The tiles would pay for the construction of the memorial, which included \$26,500 for the raw bronze that would be used to build the statues.

The idea for the tribute was immediately embraced. When the day came to pour the concrete for the base, only one man had been hired to do the work, but many others showed up.

“Seven finishers came who weren’t working that day and just heard about it,” said Bob Pruitt, a veteran and artist Gale’s husband. That night, as the concrete set, a homeless man in a wheelchair sat nearby.

“He stayed here all night with his cell phone to make sure nobody disturbed it,” said Tiedeman. “He was homeless but also a vet. He felt really connected to it.”

Later a slab of stone upon which the statues would be mounted was installed. By pure coincidence it weighed 911 pounds, and organizers decided to note the weight – and its symbolic reference to the 2001 terrorist attacks – on a plaque mounted at the memorial.

Around the time the project was being conceptualized, the cost of bronze was skyrocketing because of great demand from China. Bob Pruitt said that – although the final details of what the tribute would look like hadn’t been settled on – he got a foundry in Mexico to agree to purchase the raw material before the price could go any higher.

Meanwhile, a local philanthropist, Jan Bourgeois, underwrote the project. For the next nine years, the group slowly sold tiles. The revenues went to repay the loan and pay for upkeep of the tribute.

The last tile, completing the wall, was installed just two weeks ago.

“There are a lot of stories on this wall,” Gale Pruitt said.

Last month, organizers gifted the tribute to the city of Escondido, which will now pay for any repairs as part of its public arts program. Routine maintenance will be conducted by the local Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1513.

“From here on out the VWF post will be taking care of this, keeping it clean,” said VFW Commander Matt Foster. “We put a wax job on the statutes about a month ago. We’ll come through about every two weeks and sweep everything off, knock down the cobwebs, just keep everything clean and reporting any damage to the city.”

Escondido’s annual Veteran’s Day Observance will be held at 11 a.m. Wednesday at Grape Day Park’s Wall of Courage. The annual event is organized by the Allied Veterans Council, a team of Commanders of American Legion Post 149, VFW Post 1513, and Disabled American Veterans Chapter 70.