



War exhibit puts a face to the war

Always Lost: A Meditation on War WNC exhibit launches national tour



Michael Nelson stands in front of one of the panels of the Always Lost: A Meditation on War exhibit.

Jim Grant

by Amy Roby

Special to The R-C

In the fall of 2008, Western Nevada College sociology professor Don Carlson was taken aback after seeing the New York Times' Roster of the Dead.

“Four thousand faces of American military who had perished stared back at me,” he said, “and I realized that this war has been perhaps one of the most impersonal wars ever fought.”

Carlson and WNC English professor Marilee Swirczek envisioned an art exhibit that would recognize Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom through poetry, prose and photographs. The idea was to personalize the conflicts and to honor the sacrifices made by American troops and their families.

Retired Marine Maj. Kevin Burns chose the name for the exhibit based upon an observation by American writer Gertrude Stein: “War is never fatal but always lost. Always Lost.” Burns also took the point in creating the Wall of the Dead, with photographs that compel viewers to “look into the eyes” of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

The Wall of the Dead features more than 5,000 names and photographs of U.S military war casualties; it is the heart and focus of Always Lost. Twenty Pulitzer Prize-winning photographs by David Leeson and Cheryl

Diaz Meyer (courtesy of the Dallas Morning News) are juxtaposed with literary work from Professor Swirczek's creative writing classes and other Northern Nevada writers.

WNC student veterans and local residents Cody Loveday, Alex Malm and Amy Smee are profiled. A portion of the exhibit displays poetry by SPC Noah Pierce of Minnesota, whose mother contacted Swirczek when she learned about the show and offered to share her son's writing. Pierce took his own life after serving two tours of duty in Iraq.

What began as a class project morphed into an art exhibit that recently embarked on a national tour. The University of Wisconsin-Marinette, is the first to showcase *Always Lost: A Meditation on War*. UW-Marinette gallery curator professor James LaMalfa said, "This is the most important exhibit I will have installed in four decades."

The exhibit will remain in Wisconsin for at least a year. After October, it will make its way to half a dozen other affiliate UW campuses. From there it will travel to Alfred State College in New York. The schedule to accommodate additional requests for the exhibit from other universities and organizations is pending.

WNC began to receive requests for *Always Lost* during its original installation at their gallery in the summer 2009. The show needed to be completely reformatted to achieve archival quality and make it suitable for travel. A committee was formed, grant writing efforts commenced, and marketing and fundraising efforts got underway.

Local artist, graphic designer and WNC student Renee Ekleberry wrote the project grant that was awarded funding by the Nevada Arts Council, the Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs and the National Endowment for the Arts. Ekleberry, fellow student Jolene Hoxie and instructor Kevin Burns spent hundreds of hours formatting the 27 panels which feature the thousands of photographs and names of U.S. casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Committee members Doug Deacy, Carol Kalleres, Dr. Eugene Paslov, Amy Roby and Marilee Swirczek contributed time and energy throughout the summer to generate awareness and raise funding for the show. Additionally, several Carson Valley businesses made generous contributions to ensure the exhibit would be reformatted and ready to ship to Wisconsin on time.

Michael Nelson of GrafX8 Media Group in Minden became involved after Ekleberry told him about the project. He remembers the first time he laid eyes upon a panel for the Wall of the Dead, which he calls “tragically compelling.”

“If this doesn't capture you, if it doesn't give you pause, (the photos) should help you appreciate what is going on,” Nelson said. “Every single one of these men and women has made the ultimate sacrifice for what we take for granted. This is a way to fight alongside them from home, as long as we start paying attention. Our heads have been in the sand. It's mind-boggling.”

Nelson donated services, reformatted photos and reworked the canvas panels for the Wall.

Robin Chapin, who owns Robin's Frame House in Minden, has an extensive background in custom framing and donated her services in order to highlight the 20 Dallas Morning News combat photographs. Chapin shares studio space with Ekleberry and dove in after hearing about the project.

“I believe this is an important cause,” she said. “This is something that the American public needs to see. It puts a real face to the name and to the war.”

Renee Ekleberry is a local artist and freelance graphic designer whose original artwork can be seen throughout Carson Valley. She can be reached at 782-1124. Her website, www.PinkRibbonArtworks.com features many beautiful prints, the proceeds of which are donated to women who are dealing with breast cancer.

GrafX8 Media Group is at 1617 Water St., Suite G, Minden. Owner Michael Nelson specializes in fine art reproduction, photo restoration and large format printing. Information, 783-1985 or www.grafx8.com.

Robin Chapin is preparing to relaunch Robin's Frame House at the end of this month. She offers custom and hand-crafted framing services and photography and is also located at 1617 Water St., Minden. She may be reached at (775)721-7542 or robinchapin@yahoo.com.

As part of the commitment to recognize and honor the sacrifices of

American troops, the Wall of the Dead will continue to be updated to reflect additional casualties, as funding permits. To make a financial contribution to this traveling exhibit, contact the Western Nevada College Foundation office at (775) 445-3240. For information about the exhibit, contact Marilee Swirczek at (775) 445-4284.

Amy Roby is the Ranchos Roundup columnist for The R-C.