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THE GOOD LIFE

Hammel: 'With no limits,' Cloisters on the Platte project was a unique opportunity for Nebraska native

By Paul Hammel / World-Herald staff writer 5 min ago



The sixth Station of the Cross at the Cloisters on the Platte. Ten sculptors from across the country contributed to the retreat's Stations of the Cross.

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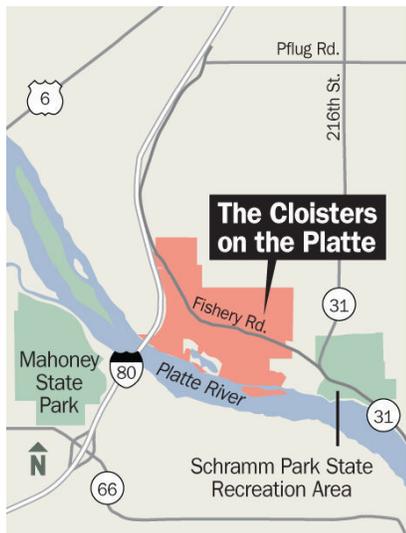
JULIA NAGY/THE WORLD-HERALD



LOVELAND, Colo. — George Lundeen has sculpted presidents from Thomas Jefferson to Ronald Reagan, explorers such as Lewis and Clark, astronauts, war heroes and legendary athletes, from Red Grange to Dan Marino.



Loveland, Colorado, artists George Lundeen, left, Ann LaRose, Mark Lundeen, Bets Holland Lundeen and Joseph Bainer. The rest of the 10 sculptors who worked on the project were from elsewhere in Colorado and Oregon.



THE WORLD-HERALD

MORE INFORMATION



'I'm really quite pleased': Joe Ricketts finishes multimillion-dollar religious retreat near Gretna

Joe Ricketts turns to bread sales to help fund Cloisters on the Platte religious retreat

But in a corner of his busy studio in this Front Range town is a work he calls special, the model of a sculpture that, beginning this weekend, is expected to draw thousands of people to a quiet, wooded retreat south of Gretna.

The piece is a dramatic representation of the lowering of Jesus from the cross following his crucifixion. Two Roman soldiers lower the limp body into the waiting arms of Jesus' mother and Joseph of Arimathea, who would later place Jesus in a cave-like tomb. Clutching the cross is Mary Magdalene.

The finished bronze, which was three years in the making, is one of 14 Stations of the Cross installed at the multimillion-dollar spiritual retreat, the Cloisters on the Platte, developed by TD Ameritrade founder and philanthropist Joe Ricketts amid the bluffs of the Platte River.

Lundeen, a native of Holdrege, Nebraska, and a graduate of Hastings College, said the Stations project was unique, not only in its large size — perhaps the largest sculpture project of its kind in 50 years — but in the freedom given to the artists to fully develop the scenes.

“Joe just wanted to make sure we did the best we possibly could, with no limits,” Lundeen said. “It’s the one time in my career that I could do that.”

Lundeen and his brother, Mark, who also grew up in Holdrege, were part of a team of 10 who are among the best sculptors in the country, commissioned by Ricketts to depict the last dramatic moments in the life of Jesus Christ, from the condemnation by Pontius Pilate to his burial in a stony tomb.

What they produced has been compared to a modern take on Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. And it sits right on Omaha’s doorstep, just off Interstate 80.

The more than 60 bronze figures, each 7 feet tall, are laid out along a 2,500-foot walkway — the same distance walked by

Jesus to his crucifixion. Lundeen's team, which included his sister-in-law, a cousin and "someone who looks like a Lundeen," produced six of the Stations, as well as a bronze horse that appears in one of the other works.

Initially, 20 to 30 sculptures were envisioned. But Ricketts, after presentations by the artists involved, expanded the project.

The end result, he said Friday, exceeded his "wildest dreams in terms of beauty and emotional impact."

"I believe people from around the country and, indeed, from around the world will want to witness these very unique stations," Ricketts said.

The goal of the Stations of the Cross, he said, was for visitors and those on retreats to experience "an incredibly important moment in human history and a turning point for mankind ... in a personal and powerful way."

Photos: Stations of the Cross at Joe Ricketts' Cloisters on the Platte

1 of 14



Station twelve

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STEVE WILLIS PHOTO

George and Mark Lundeen are no strangers to big projects.

Whenever a Scheel's sporting goods store is built across the nation, Lundeen sculptures of Jefferson and other historic figures are installed outside. George Lundeen has seven sculptures at the State Capitol in Nebraska, including three busts in the Nebraska Hall of Fame, more than any other artist. His works are featured across the state, from the Mari Sandoz Center in Chadron to the Center for Great Plains Studies in Lincoln, and in North Park in his hometown.

The studio's current projects include a life-sized Dick Butkus in a fierce tackling pose for the football player's alma mater, the University of Illinois, and the Apollo 11 astronauts for the Kennedy Space Center.

Lundeen, 69, moved to Loveland 41 years ago, trading a job teaching art at Kearney State College for a sweaty post at a local metal foundry. He soon was sending his own sculptures to the foundry, and over the years he has been a key player in developing Loveland as a hub for outdoor artwork and sculptors. Even the local Dairy Queen has a sculpture garden.

Loveland's "Sculpture in the Park" show, now in its 35th year, was founded by Lundeen and other artists, and draws 2,000 works done by 160 artists. When the city cut back on the number of sculptors invited, Lundeen founded a companion show nearby. At one time, 600 sculptors gathered in Loveland each August.

"My idea was to have 1,000 artists show up in Loveland," he said. "I didn't care if they were good, bad or ugly. But what a neat thing to show 30,000 to 40,000 people what you do."

These days, he heads up the Artists' Charitable Fund, a Loveland-based charity that has raised and spent more than

\$500,000 to aid artists facing health crises.

Somehow, the affable, prank-loving and mustachioed Lundeen finds time to cultivate some other hobbies, including golfing with a former Nebraska volleyball coach, Terry Pettit, and playing washtub bass in a “punk bluegrass” band called the Bahoovas. “We do what behooves us,” he said, as he thumped the homemade instrument.

The Cloisters on the Platte greeted its first 80 people for a spiritual retreat this weekend. Public viewing of the sculptures will begin Monday, with self-guided tours open Mondays through Wednesdays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and on Thursdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. A \$10 donation is suggested, and will get you a pair of earphones that provides an audio narrative of the Stations of the Cross.

Public viewings are not allowed on the weekends, which is when silent retreats are held.

The Stations of the Cross could become a national and perhaps international destination for visitors, according to Ricketts and Lundeen.

Said Lundeen: “When people view them, I want them to come away from it thinking that we did what was intended — to build a Stations of the Cross that will have some real effect on people.”

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