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Ideas Abound For Permanent 12/14 Memorial

By Nancy K. Crevier
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Photo:

“Guardian,” a stone sculpture by international artist and art teacher Peter Rubino, was donated through HealingNewtown Arts Space as a permanent memorial to 12/14. Smaller than many sculptures offered to the town, it is currently placed just outside of The Great Room of Newtown Congregational Church.



Photo: *Rob Kaiser*

The town has received numerous ideas for parks and green areas to permanently honor the memory of those lost 12/14. Among them are these blueprints from Richmond Jones, a

political cartoonist from Southbury and a Newtown native, for a Sandy Hook Elementary School Memorial Park.



Photo: *Nancy Crevier*

Determination overrode practicality with the Rock of Angels memorial, envisioned by Florida resident Rich Gray and created by Maine artists. The creation of the seven-ton granite memorial was carried out despite cautions from town officials that the town had no place in mind, and had made no decisions on a permanent memorial. Through local efforts, the sculpture was delivered and put in place just behind St John’s Episcopal Church in mid-August.

The permanent memorial to the lives lost April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Colorado was created with the participation of the Columbine school community and the efforts of an original group of 100 people, according to Doug Ireland, division chief for the Littleton (Colo.) Fire Rescue. It was Chief Ireland who cautioned the Newtown community in January 2013 that a permanent memorial to 12/14 would be “a slow process,” noting that it was eight years before the Columbine memorial was completed.

More than 5,000 entries from 63 nations were submitted to a design competition for a permanent memorial to 9/11, which opened to the public in 2011.

Visitors to Nickel Mine, Penn., will not find a statue, building, or sculpture commemorating the terrible day in 2006, when a gunman lined up ten young school girls there, killing five of them. The school house was swiftly razed. The site is now a horse pasture, with ancient trees — and five young evergreens.

As of November 2013, Boston had not yet formed a Remembrance Committee to create a permanent memorial to the April 15, 2013, Boston Marathon bombing tragedy.

What a permanent memorial to 12/14 will eventually be is the challenge given to the [newly formed](#) Permanent Memorial Commission in Newtown. It will be a daunting task as members, some of whom lost loved ones that day, sift through the suggestions that have been offered by people across the nation, and perhaps solicit additional ideas.

HealingNewtown Arts Space, originally housed in a vacant storefront on Queen Street and now located in the lower level of Newtown Congregational Church on West Street, became a receptacle for donated sculptures and artwork, as well as the recipient of ideas from those believing they had the answer to the difficult question of the what, where, and when of a permanent memorial.

More than a dozen suggestions catalogued by the organization involve greenery, from trees with benches to donated evergreens to park spaces. The creation of memorial parks at Fairfield Hills or at the Sandy Hook Elementary School “with Feng Shui elements” are among the ideas, as is the suggestion for a park with a willow tree centrally located and including a ring of spruce trees. A landscaped walkway for exercise and meditation, or dogwood trees and a granite bench; or evergreens and name plaques, shrubs, or flowering plants might be the appropriate memorial, said others.

A memorial bridge, a street naming, a memorial horse barn, an art museum/gallery on the old Lexington Gardens site off of Church Hill Road, a children’s museum, or a memorial carousel could serve as a permanent memorial to 12/14.

While HealingNewtown received many works of art, even more ideas for a permanent memorial came to them in the forms of blueprints, letters, e-mails, or phone calls said HealingNewtown volunteer Rob Kaiser.

The suggestions came locally and from all over the country, and even a small number internationally, Mr Kaiser said.

“Some were really well thought-out ideas,” he said, while others were vague. Offers have come from those with little fame as well as from the famous.

A Newtown High School teacher, Trent Harrison, offered his thought for naming 26 stars for the victims, with a large sundial constructed with the coordinates of those stars.

Internationally known artists Mimi Sammis and Sergey Eylanbekov have concepts for sculptures.

Mr Kaiser said that he or other volunteers had contacted nearly every person who put forth an idea, even speaking by phone with several.

“A lot were just suggestions, but most were very impassioned about their ideas,” he said. It was more difficult in some instances to convince a person that a permanent 12/14 memorial would be “a process, that it will take time,” said Mr Kaiser. “Some were very persistent, and couldn’t accept that.”

A case in point is the Rock of Angels, now [located behind St John’s Episcopal Church](#) in Sandy Hook Center. “His passion was greater than any limitations,” Mr Kaiser said of the Florida resident, Rich Gray, who envisioned and moved the project forward. Work on the granite memorial was put into action long before Mr Gray or any of the artists involved had an inkling as to if it would ever actually find a home in Newtown. Through his New England connections and local efforts, Rock of Angels was set in place and dedicated on August 12, 2013.

“It seems very appropriate and discretely placed,” Mr Kaiser said.

A bronze angel sculpture cast by another artist who “had to see it done” [found a home at St Rose of Lima Church](#), Mr Kaiser said, and “The Guardian,” a stone sculpture [donated by artist Peter Rubino](#), watches over the comings and goings of The Great Room at Newtown Congregational Church.

Still other ideas for more grandiose sculptures that could become a focal point of a future memorial remain on paper: three figures, a teacher and two students; 26 towering chairs incorporating flowers and candle holders; children around a May Pole; a 20- by 6-foot undefined stainless steel sculpture with lighting; bronze plaques affixed to a stone fountain; a large, ribbonlike stained glass of ascending stairs, representing the children; cast angels; a fountain utilizing metal, quartz, and light, with butterflies and cone flowers; a life-sized statue of a girl holding flowers and a boy running with balloons. The Connecticut Education Association offered a concept of a life-sized bronze statue of a teacher and students. Plaques and tiles with names, and memory walls make up other suggestions.

HealingNewtown, through the Newtown Cultural Arts Commission that was charged by the town with tracking the offers, has a long list of murals that artists would like to create for Newtown. Some suggest group efforts and others are personal concepts of what would be the ideal permanent memorial for the town.

The offers came from large and generous hearts, with wonderful intentions, Mr Kaiser said. But for the most part, “It was abundantly clear most had not considered where such an offering would go [as a permanent display].” Many sculptures are clearly intended for an outdoor, public space; parks require land; and a public mural demands a large and prominent place to be effective.

HealingNewtown does not vet the ideas. It is there to respectfully receive submissions, which continue to come in, even more than a year after the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

“We recently just received 12 beautiful stained-glass panels, done by a school in Pennsylvania, I believe,” Mr Kaiser said.

Which, if any, of these offers, when, and where will be the challenge of the Permanent Memorial Committee.

Whether well planned or off the top of the head, though, Mr Kaiser has been impressed by the heartfelt offers.

“For me,” he said, “for all the sorrow, being witness to this outpouring of condolence has been amazing to see.”