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Two Cape Coral artists create sculptures as memorial to soldiers

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Two local artists had a vision and their community is helping make it real.

Cape Coral artists Rudy Diaz and Dan Prado approached the Cape Coral Community Foundation two years ago about their artistic effort to pay tribute to our soldiers.

Dan, a veteran in the U.S. Army, held a miniature clay sculpture of a soldier saluting the flag and one of a boy holding a soccer ball and saluting the flag.

They wanted to create life-sized bronzed sculptures as a memorial to the soldiers.

"We've lost thousands of troops and it's very important that we understand we live the way we live because of them," Dan said.

Rudy grew up in Algeria, in northern Africa, and suffered from terrorist acts throughout his childhood.

"The little boy represents freedom and we want to be free," Rudy said. "War is ugly. It's not easy to do, and I wanted to say thank you for our freedom."

The foundation gave them \$2,500 in seed money and that vision has been growing ever since.

More volunteers got on board to help raise funds, including Frank Dethlefsen, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Korea and owns Suncoast Moving & Storage. He became chairman of the committee, Tribute to a Soldier, after helping the artists move their life-size sculptures to Sarasota where they wait for money to get it bronzed.

The committee is working to raise that money and more to get the statues standing in the Memorial Area of Four Mile Cove Ecological Preserve in Cape Coral this year.

The City of Cape Coral Bridge Committee and Parks and Recreation endorsed the placement of the memorial. It still requires City Council approval.

"We're not just trying to put a statue in place," Frank said. "We're trying to create a legacy."

So far, the group has raised \$8,700 with a goal of \$53,000 to bronze, deliver, build a foundation, maintain and put the statue permanently in place at Echo Park.

They've done a lot: drafted a rendering of the memorial, creating a Web site and a Power Point presentation describing their fundraising efforts.

But there's still a lot to do. They want to raise additional funds for college scholarships and to help local high schools with JROTC programs.

But good fortune is on their side, Frank said.

They got permission to use the song, "Tribute to a Soldier," written by country music singer Ken Randolph.

Because of a Cape Coral connection, the singer learned about their memorial mission and happily agreed to let them use his song.

He had planned to sing the song, about honoring a soldier only one time.

"The song has taken on a life of its own," Ken said in a phone interview from his home in Nashville, Tenn.

He sang it to President George W. Bush last year before he left office.

Jeff Cook and Charlie Daniels wanted to record the song with him. Their version can be found on iTunes.

Ken had no problem sharing his song to promote an important cause.

"They are such a good group of guys building the monument," he said.

Frank and the other dedicated committee members hope to inspire others to contribute so they can raise enough money to unveil the sculptures this November on Veterans Day.

They won't give up.
