



Photographs by Danielle Austen for The New York Times



Stephen Shaheen, left, created the Memoria Project after the trade center attack. He wanted the 20-ton slabs to be placed in Sandy Hook, N.J., but permanent memorials are prohibited on national park land. Now in Highlands, N.J., their future is uncertain.

Highlands Journal

Two 20-Ton Marble Tributes to 9/11, Searching for a Home

By ANDREW JACOBS

HIGHLANDS, N.J., Sept. 17 — Contemplative and teary-eyed, the crowds start arriving at dawn and maintain their quiet vigils long after nightfall.

Since early this month, when the twin pillars of marble arrived at a vest-pocket veterans park here, the Memoria Project, as it is called, has become a powerful evocation of the 9/11 tragedy. It draws local families in mourning and tourists from far away who have heard about the mammoth white columns with their haunting figures of a man and a woman half-encased in stone.

But while it has become an instant icon here, the Memoria Project is essentially homeless. Although the sculptor, Stephen Shaheen, and his supporters had intended the piece for the lonely dunes of Sandy Hook, symbolically filling the void once occupied by the twin towers, federal rules bar memorials and monuments from national park land.

Another possible setting, a county-owned bluff with unobstructed views of the New York skyline, has also been rejected as too small.

Officials in this shore town would love for the project to remain here on Bay Avenue, but Mr. Shaheen and others fret over the noisy, mercantile surroundings, which they say lack grandeur or a view of the city.

"I think a lot of the widows would like to see it placed in a more meditative atmosphere," said Marion Fitzgerald, who runs a support group for local widows that has

made several visits. At least a half-dozen other communities, including Asbury Park, Long Branch, Jersey City and Lower Manhattan, have expressed interest in the memorial, which, when complete, will include the names of everyone lost in last year's terrorist attacks.

Raised in nearby Rumson and trained

A federal bill would let the project go where the artist intended.

as a sculptor in Italy, Mr. Shaheen, 29, is struggling to balance conflicting public demands with his own artistic vision, one born last winter as he walked along the northern tip of Sandy Hook.

At a time when New York and other municipalities were debating their memorials, Mr. Shaheen and a friend, Evan Urbania, pushed ahead with their idea and raised \$150,000 from businesses and residents of Monmouth County, which lost 140 people on Sept. 11. They succeeded in getting quarries in Vermont and Virginia to donate the stone and won the assistance of two Tuscan stone carvers who spent months working for room, board and a small stipend.

"So many people now have a sense of ownership over this project," Mr. Shaheen said. "But 90 percent of them can't get inside

my head. But I guess at some point, I have to let go."

Among those who feel a powerful connection to the marble slabs is Joanne Smith, a local resident whose husband died at the World Trade Center. Over the summer her sons, Karl and Brad, helped chip and sand the blocks while Ms. Smith fed the volunteers. "It was a way to focus our energy and our grief in a positive way," she said. "Without recovered bodies, a lot of us need a place for reflection and remembrance." She, like many other residents, feels strongly that the memorial should stay in the area, preferably at its current location, where it is visible from the street and dramatically illuminated after dark. "An awful lot of people had losses here; they financially supported it," she said. "Its roots are here."

While open to alternatives, Mr. Shaheen and many others still have their hearts set on Sandy Hook, where the pillars spent the first four months under an arrangement with park administrators. As part of the deal, Mr. Shaheen and others offered a series of public lectures and provided opportunities for public involvement with the carving process. They also agreed to move the piece before the first anniversary.

Russell Wilson, superintendent of the Sandy Hook unit of Gateway National Recreation Area, said federal guidelines restrict the installation of permanent monuments and memorials in national parks. He also agrees with the Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as the New Jersey Audubon Society and other environmental groups, that the Memoria Project would take up precious habitat and draw too many people to an area that

is crucial for nesting and migrating birds.

"It seems there are no shortage of communities interested in this," he said. "I can't understand why there's so much focus on Sandy Hook."

Others agree, saying the Hook, with its \$10 summertime parking fee, relative isolation and long history as a military base and artillery range, is a poor choice for a public memorial to the victims of mass murder. "Why put a gorgeous monument to humanity in a place associated with violence and war?" asked Bernice Berger, a Highlands resident who was visiting the sculptures.

There are many who feel otherwise. Representative Frank Pallone Jr., a Democrat who represents the Jersey Shore, has introduced a bill in Congress to make an exception for the Memoria Project, and other elected officials have joined the cause. Even if the bill passes, the sculptures could be placed in the park only after environmental and historical preservation reviews.

In the meantime, Mr. Shaheen has been scouring the bay shore for other possible locations, including private land, and trying not to push too hard for Sandy Hook. Soft-spoken and unschooled in politics, he said he recently became concerned about the long-term effects of ocean spray on marble and the potential difficulty of setting 20-ton slabs on shifting sand.

But he is also wary of stirring up too much strife in a wounded community. "It would be an easy battle to fight and I believe the media and public would be on our side," he said. "But I worry that controversy around the memorial might impair it as an instrument of healing."