

The National Service Animals Memorial Project

By Sarah Montague

The Lincoln Memorial; Arlington Cemetery; the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; the 9/11 Memorial and Museum; Lord Nelson’s column in Trafalgar Square; that little metal disc in the town square or village green almost anywhere in the U.S. with a modest inscription commemorating the life of someone important to that community who may have died to protect it.

Memorials. They are the concrete version of our memories—whether individual, familial, or collective. They can be found in many countries, cities, towns, and villages. They can be as large as a courthouse and as small as an orange.

Anyone who has been loved is deserving of remembrance, but we often think of memorials in the context of human service, honoring soldiers, heroes and heroines in the face of disaster, first responders.

But our history is also full of courageous animal narratives and these heroes are equally deserving of honor and recognition. And if sculptor Susan Bahary has anything to say about it, they will get it.

Bahary has a degree in film and television from NYU, but had always been drawn to art. She also showed Afghan Hounds at one time, and eventually her two interests came together to shape the career she has claimed since 1989.

“I received my first commission, our country’s first official war dog memorial, “Always Faithful” in 1994. It was unveiled at the Pentagon and dedicated at the (Marine Corps) War Dog Cemetery at the US Naval Base on Guam.”

Bahary has received many commissions since then, including a 2018 request to create a memorial for Sergeant Stubby [the heroic mascot of the 102nd Infantry Regiment in World War I].

“And that really opened my eyes to the hearts of those who serve. They were warriors but never forgot the dogs they loved who saved their lives.

Sergeant Stubby lives at the Trees of Honor Veterans’ Park in Middletown, Connecticut. And this desire to commemorate at the local level is common, notes Bahary. She says that communities seem as eager to honor their animal heroes as their human counterparts. “These heroes, they don’t ask for themselves.” And she sees the permanent tributes she creates as a form of education.

“People outside the world of service animals and handlers, they get to be inspired in a way they might not have been otherwise. When you create these memorials, it’s an opportunity to have a conversation. educate, and it hopefully inspires generations to come and learn about the important work that our animals have done for us, and what those handlers have done.”

The memorials Bahary created a cumulative appreciation of service animals, and eventually shaped itself as a mission:

“All of these projects came together for me, including recent ones in other countries where I noticed they honored different animals other than dogs—the horses, mules, donkeys, and carrier pigeons that were also in the war. It affected me, you know—my heart, my mind—and it just made me realize that we haven’t told this story. We haven’t honored all these animals.

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We need to do it; and I think I'm the person probably more likely to do it, being that I've been doing this for so many years. I'm just, you know, I'm just gonna do everything I can to try to make it happen."

Baby Steps

There are a lot of steps to "everything". First, create a community. Bahary built a website for the project, and she says, "I reached out to my friends in this world of animals and asked them what they thought of it—and if they wanted to be a part of it in any way. And they did. So they became founding members of the National Service Animals Memorial."



Sergeant Stubby

tion's capital.

Bureaucracies everywhere are complex, but probably even more so in Washington. Bahary's cause had to meet two challenges: gaining official support for the idea of a permanent memorial, and then finding legislative sponsors in Congress.

She says, "Before you can get a bill introduced for a memorial, you have to be approved by the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission."

The Commission is comprised of many of Washington's prestigious cultural organizations, including the National Parks Service; the Fine Arts Commission; Architect of the Capitol; and the Battlefield and Monuments Division among them. A description of its mission can be found here: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectID=44217>

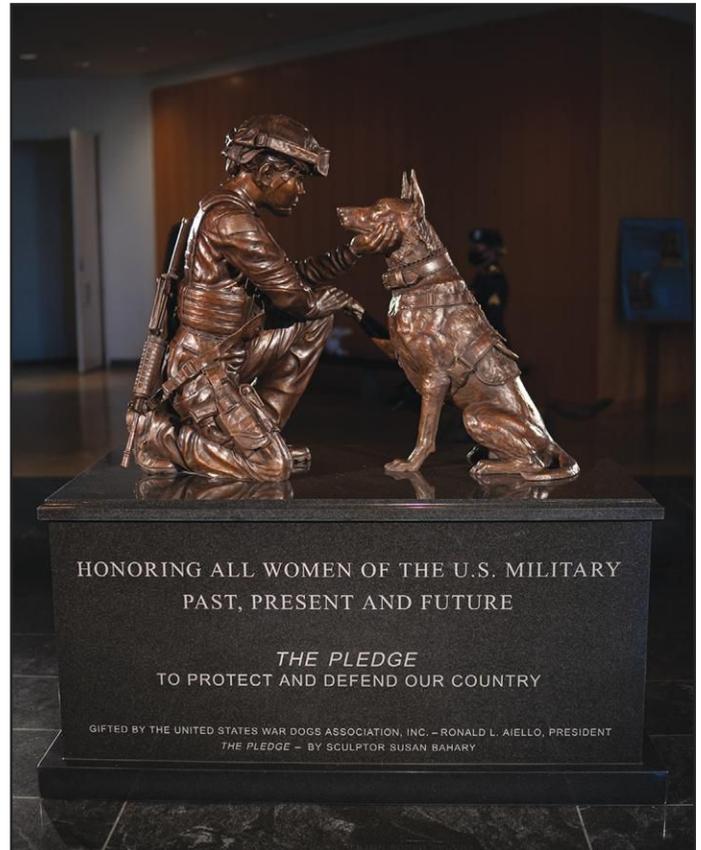
There is a formal presentation process and Bahary had very

Next, it became clear that in order to attract support and donations, the project would need to be a non-profit, with a 501(C)3 tax designation. (This is also a prerequisite for any national memorial advocacy group.) Happily, Bahary was already a board member of Critter Lovers at Work, a San Francisco organization helping shelter animals. It was winding down, and the board decided to convert their mission to the NSAM.

"That was very helpful."

Ms. Bahary Goes to Washington

At first, Bahary considered establishing the project—and the memorial—in San Francisco. But there was an overwhelming sense that a national monument should be in the na-



little time to make her case:

"So we had to show in 20 minutes, through various methods, why our project was deserving of Federal land in Washington, D.C. And we had to show that it [the Memorial] had a broad significance throughout the history of the United States, going to the future—a broad significance for American citizens."

She says the response still gives her chills. "They not only gave us unanimous approval, but pointed out to us that they feel they had missed an important part of our country's history."

With that initial hurdle behind her, Bahary reached out to two Congress people who she felt might be interested in sponsoring a bill: "Senator Richard Blumenthal (CT) was our lead sponsor in the Senate, and Congresswoman Susan Wild (PA) was our lead sponsor in the House. It was a bipartisan/bicameral bill and we had other co-sponsors on both sides of the aisle."

The *Congressional Record* reflects the process of ratification for most legislation. As an example of the kind of support the Memorial drew, here is part of the testimony of Michael A. Caldwell, then Associate Director of Park Planning, Facilities, and Lands for the National Parks Service from September 21, 2022:

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 3447, a bill to authorize the National Service Animals Memorial Act.

The Department supports this legislation.

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S. 3447 would authorize the National Service Animals Monument Corporation to establish a commemorative work in the Nation's Capital to commemorate the heroic deeds and sacrifices of service animals and handlers of service animals in the United States. The bill requires compliance with the Commemorative Works Act (40 U.S.C. Chapter 89) (CWA), prohibits federal funds from being used to establish the memorial, and provides direction on the disposition of unspent funds.

Service animals have assisted, comforted, and protected American lives throughout our Nation's history. The bill's findings note that "service and working animals, such as dogs, horses, homing pigeons, donkeys, mules, dolphins, sea lions, and others, have worked alongside and supported humans throughout history and have created strong human-animal bonds."

The National Service Animals Memorial Act passed in December of 2022 (in record time for a bill relating to animals), and was signed into law by President Biden. This historic moment opened up the next phase of the project: fundraising. The endorsement from Congress gave the Monument a future, but "you have to privately fund it," notes Bahary.

And, there's a timeline—seven years from authorization. "We have to have all the funds—plus 10% for maintenance—in place before we can break ground."

The first priority is site selection. "We need the first \$150,000 to get us through the process, by paying a consultant. They take you through the entire process. It takes at least nine months, depending on what area you go into. So that's the most immediate."

Bahary is already working on visualizations, tailored for different possible sites: "one is more of a park-like setting, for a larger area of land, and one is more of cityscape plaza type of design." And, depending on the eventual actual location, these ideas might be blended in some way.

Once a site is selected, and a mature design is completed, it will go back to the Arts Commission for review and approval.

It's very early, and Bahary has been told that the first stages of a campaign are the hardest—but she's hopeful.

"Everybody who hears about this project just loves it. And they want to help. It's important that we get the word out, and

that people who can open doors for us will try to help us open those doors."

Word of mouth is always a good tactic, but the NSAM's inviting website <https://nationalserviceanimalsmemorial.org/> is also a compelling tool. It includes a mission statement, "to create a beautiful and moving national memorial in the nation's Capital to educate, inspire, and honor the work, contributions, and sacrifices of service animals and their handlers throughout U.S. history, and to celebrate the human-animal

bond." It is supported by a quote from *Mahatma Gandhi*, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way it treats their animals."

There is a photo essay describing some of the ways service animals are aiding people today; links to educational resources for parents and teachers; a page listing "Friends" of the project whose testimony contributed to the National Service Animals Memorial Act; and of course, prompts to donate.

I am interviewing Bahary (on Zoom) and behind her, in what is clearly her studio, I can see the forms of many sculptures in progress, mostly canine.

As an artist, she's self-taught, and works in many media—bronze, fine art acrylic, stainless steel, and "even cold-cast resin". This range of materials, and the various stages required for completing a sculpture, mean Bahary is always surrounded by "companion animals"—even if they are works of the imagi-

nation—in progress. For example, over Bahary's shoulder is President George W. Bush's service dog, Sully, a copy in resin of the public sculpture, which is bronze, and is in the George Bush Presidential Library at Texas A&M.

In launching the Memorial project, Bahary has taken on many other roles—planner, fundraiser, muse—but she is clear about which one comes first:

"I'm a patriotic person, and whenever I see something positive happening in the country [such as the work of service animals] it moves me, and I want to be part of it in whatever way I am capable. As an artist, I feel responsible to do what I can to honor them. And that feels like an honor for *me*, and a privilege."



Sully the Service Dog