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Viking Strong: Unity through art

Orange Poppy Studio takes on big, colorful community project



Crystal Still (left), and Bonnie Nevins are co-owners of Orange Poppy Art Studio, 1990 Whitehaven Road. They opened their current studio in September to give students, from toddlers to adults, a way to interact, be creative and just have some joy. (Photos by Karen Carr Keefe)

BY KAREN CARR KEEFE
ERIE COUNTY EDITOR

A small Grand Island art studio that's less than a year old has wasted no time bringing the community together in a big way.

Born in the midst of COVID-19, Orange Poppy Art Studio, 1990 Whitehaven Road, decided on a project that could lift people's spirits by letting them create a large piece of community art.

The community project was the first thing they did as an art studio, said proprietors Bonnie Nevans and Crystal Still, both of Grand Island.

The result, the Viking Strong mural, hangs in the newly reopened Grand Island Memorial Library, welcoming young and old to share a space and unite, despite a pandemic whose effect was keeping people apart.

Seventy individuals and families volunteered to be art guinea pigs, decorating a square at the artists' request, but having little clue as to what the end product would be.

"In the height of the lockdown – March or April – you saw those positive stories, how people came together in ways that they could," Nevans said. "And so we said, maybe our first kind of kickoff as a business could be a communitywide thing, where we could get as many people

who wanted to, to be involved," she said. "It would be something for artists and non-artists alike. Just people who wanted something to do."

They put the word out on Facebook "and we got a great response," Nevans said. "Originally, it was supposed to be 60 artists, but we had so many respond that we added a row on so we could up it to 70. That's why the 2020 is there."

"We weren't sure how it was going to go – where people were going to go, 'Who the heck are you?'"

"So basically, if they said they were interested we put

See GRAND ISLAND ART, continued on Page 5

Community embraces DeGlopper Memorial

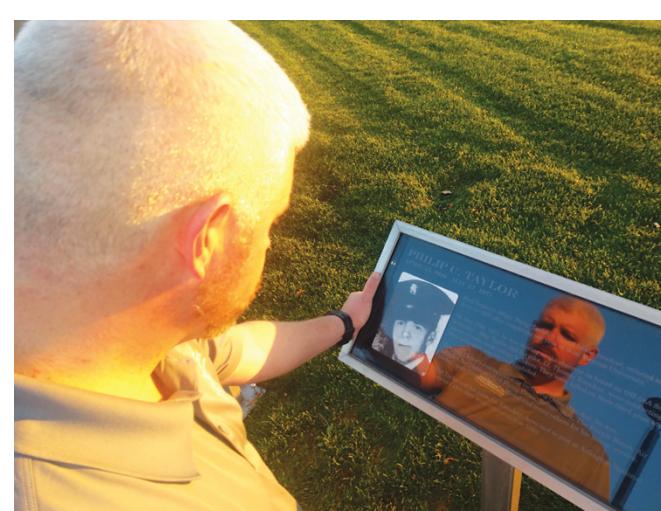
Islander Chris Taylor volunteers in honor of his uncle who was Killed in Action

BY MICHAEL J. BILLONI

Chris Taylor is a lifelong Grand Island resident who followed in the footsteps of family members who served their country in a branch of the armed forces when he joined the United States Air Force upon graduating from Grand Island High School in 1999. He left the Island with the memory of his uncle, Army Sgt. Philip C. Taylor, heavy on his heart. Sgt. Taylor was one of the first U.S. soldiers killed on Cambodian soil during an air strike at the tail end of the Vietnam War in 1971.

The young businessman, who co-owns Certified Auto-Brokers on Grand Island Boulevard and is married with two young children at home, is one of many volunteer members of the DeGlopper Memorial Expansion Committee. He chaired the fun-raising committee and, while DeGlopper Memorial he does not say it, you can see the determination in the financing that will be met for "an amazing community project that will not only properly acknowledge our veterans and those killed in action, but it will serve as an education for visitors about those who answered the call to serve our country."

According to Committee Secretary Elsie Martino, when the final design of the DeGlopper Memorial at the



Chris Taylor reflects on the Killed In Action plaque of his uncle Philip, killed during the Vietnam War. (Photos by Mike Billoni)

intersection of Grand Island Boulevard and Baseline Road was approved, the price tag was \$750,000. With just under four months to go before the June 5 unveiling, \$171,550 in donations is needed to complete the entire wish list of this spectacular memorial in the center of town.

"We are clearly in the home stretch of a very long road, but we are happy to say we have raised enough money

through donations for a spectacular unveiling of an amazing statue of Charles N. DeGlopper, our Killed in Action stanchions will be in place, the wall of veterans is in place and so much more will be ready for the public on June 5," a proud Taylor said during an interview this week. "The remaining funds we will continue to raise are for projects that will enhance this entire memorial."

Grand Island native Pfc. Charles N. DeGlopper was killed in action in World War II on June 9, 1944, in the Battle of Normandy. He was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his bravery in saving the lives of fellow members of his Army platoon.

Taylor and Dan "Double D" Drexelius, the project manager, would not name individual donors for fear of missing someone, but as the project gets closer to completion, they will recognize everyone who has played a part in it.

"We have raised more than half a million dollars over the past several years and it has mostly come in the form of small donations from families and residents on the Island and throughout Western New York," Taylor said. "Just the other day, I opened an envelope and there was a check for \$1,000 from someone who said he has seen our progress and wanted to help."

"That has been what our fundraising has been comprised of. It is not big corporate sponsors coming in with

See KILLED, continued on Page 2



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