

Christopher Martino, 10, enjoys assisting at DeGlopper Memorial

BY MICHAEL J. BILLONI

When 10-year-old Christopher Martino returns to his fourth-grade classroom at the William Kaegebein Elementary School after spring break, he will proudly talk about the quality time he spent with his grandmother, Elsie, preserving Grand Island's storied military history.

Last week, the son of Nicholas and Heather Martino and brother of second-grader Lea, was at the DeGlopper Memorial site at the corners of Baseline Road and Grand Island Boulevard assisting his grandmother and Jordan Simone of Simone Landscaping. He was carefully placing the individual markers inscribed with the names of the 68 Grand Island residents who were Civil War soldiers.

"I am especially excited to involve my grandson on this project," said Elsie, a volunteer member of the DeGlopper Memorial Expansion Committee who was recruited by Deb Bota two years ago to handle various administrative details. "Chris helped me verify the inscriptions to make sure the names were spelled properly and all of them were delivered."

"It has been very helpful to have a second pair of eyes to make sure everything is accurate," she added. "I am hopeful his involvement helps Chris understand how important it is to remember and respect the sacrifices our veterans and their families make for us. I also hope he realizes the significance of the history that lives within these various displays and inscriptions."

The markers of the Island's Civil War veterans are located on the ground to the immediate right when you enter the park from the north. Three larger blocks with inscriptions are at the top of the space. The middle one reads: "Officers, Soldiers, and Seamen. Composing the quotas of the troops furnished to the United States by the Town



Christopher Martino, 10, left, holding his clipboard with names of all the 68 Islanders who served in the Civil War. He is making sure they are all there and spelled correctly before Jordan Simone, owner of Simone Landscaping, places them at the DeGlopper Memorial. (Photo provided by Elsie Martino)

of Grand Island, County of Erie, State of New York. In the War of the Rebellion, and covering the period from the 15th day of April 1861 to the 20th day of September 1865." To its right, the brick reads: "Freedom Is Never Free." To its left, the following is inscribed on the brick: "Grand Is-

land's Population in 1860 was 954. 68 Served."

"I am grateful to have Christopher's assistance and for the opportunity to help him understand what goes on in the background," his proud grandmother explained. "Being hands-on provides him an opportunity to learn about the valuable history that lies within the inscriptions of the pavers. I want him to understand the significance of this project."

Christopher is more interested in helping his grandmother and "Mr. (Dan) Drexelius" than talk about his time assisting them at the DeGlopper Memorial. Drexelius is project manager for the DeGlopper Memorial and welcomes local volunteers to assist before June 5.

"Last summer, I got to help Mr. Drexelius by watering the new sod," the youngster said. "He told me to water the sod until it looked droopy. I was happy to help, and I hope this is here for a long time and everyone from Grand Island gets to enjoy it."

His grandmother said Christopher is counting the days until the June 5 unveiling of the DeGlopper Memorial's life-sized statue of the town's World War II hero. "He will be there early with us to help out," she said. "He really likes the giant tree on the property. He thinks it is a good place to sit and relax while looking around this beautiful park. He is very proud of this place."

Former town supervisor and board member Mary Cooke is the unofficial historian of the DeGlopper Memorial project. She unearthed the information about the Civil War and was overjoyed to see the markers in place this week.

"After so many years of research and discussion on the best way to honor the Island's Civil War soldiers, it's very exciting to have the Civil War section of the DeGlopper Memorial installed," Cooke said. "It is beautiful! Having their names memorialized on the bricks for all to see and learn from is a huge achievement that I hope will bring greater understanding of the sacrifices the Civil War soldiers made for our freedom."

"It is very fitting that the unseasonably nice weather allowed completion in time for the 160th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, which is April 12," she added.

Elsie, who also oversees the budget and records the donations that go toward the project's hefty price tag, is humbled to be part of such a civic project and the opportunity to work with such a committed, volunteer committee whose mission is to showcase and preserve the history of Island veterans from all branches of the service.

"I have been intrigued by the personal stories shared by the veterans on the committee," explained Martino, who moved to the Island with her husband, Rob, 37 years ago

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Charles N. DeGlopper Memorial Statue and Killed in Action Plaques Unveiling Saturday, June 5, 2021, 9:45 a.m.

Grand Island Boulevard at the corner of Baseline Road



ALBERT J. KEPPLER
December 10, 1932 - August 27, 1952



Corporal (Cpl) Albert Keppler, a resident of Grand Island, enlisted in the Marine Corps as a Rifleman in 1950.

On August 27th, 1952, Cpl Keppler was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, E Company. Cpl Keppler was killed by enemy small arms fire while fighting at Bunker Hill. The Battle of Bunker Hill was fierce and 93 US military members lost their lives.

For Cpl Keppler's brave acts on that day and for his service prior, was awarded the Purple Heart, Combat Action Ribbon, National Defense Service Medal and the Republic of Korea War Service Medal.

Cpl Keppler is laid to rest at Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, NY.

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