

# Hungry Eye: Time For Heroes—A Visit with Christopher Slatoff

by Kirk Silsbee

THE NONDESCRIPT, PEA-GREEN BUILDING ON A hard-bitten corner of Highland Park in northeast Los Angeles has a small, fenced-in parking lot that sits just steps from some large, metal garage doors. On a weekday afternoon there's no foot traffic to be seen and only an occasional vehicle slides by. The periodic whoosh of the passing Metrolink is the only sound that intrudes on sculptor **Christopher Slatoff** as he works quietly in his studio. The metal doors rolled-up give him the benefit of indirect afternoon sunlight to complement the overhead lights in the high-ceilinged room, additional illumination he works by.

It's a studio with giant photos of his more celebrated sculptures, like the crucifixion of Christ and other heroic figures, as well as maquettes and pieces of upcoming projects. Slatoff is tall and broad-shouldered, yet works with deliberate care, as he bolsters and slims contours with clay.

Eleven colour photo portraits are tacked up onto the wooden side of a staircase. These images are of the Greater Pasadena military personnel who have lost their lives in the current Middle East conflicts. They represent different branches of the service, different ethnic groups and genders. They're united by their commitment to country and their collective ultimate sacrifice. They watch over Slatoff with silent vigilance, as if to ensure his fidelity to their individual and collective truths. Slatoff

works on separate pieces in rotation of what will be his *Enduring Heroes Memorial*: a seven-foot bronze of a combat soldier, with an American flag of perforated stars unfurled behind him.

The Enduring Heroes project manager, **Rhonda Kozacik**, is here today and she has a personal stake in the memorial. "In 2014," she says, "I lost a dear friend in Afghanistan. It was a shock, of course, but after a while I began to think about whether or not we're doing enough for our fallen warriors, and what's being done to honour their Gold Star families. I thought, we need to remember their courage and their sacrifices."

She learned of the eleven military men and women from the

Pasadena area who've given their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan. "One of the first things I and the other individuals who are involved in this project did was reach out to the Gold Star families that they all come from," Kozacik explains. "Some of them were reticent at first; they weren't sure that a monument

was something they wanted to be involved in."

Committee member **Shelly Lowe** went to former City of Pasadena mayor **Bill Bogaard** with the idea of creating a monument. The plan was well received, and after some tugging with the city council, the project was approved. The sculpture will sit at **Defender's Pathway** at the intersection of Orange Grove Boulevard and Colorado Boulevard, kitty-corner from the 1927 **War Memorial Flagpole** dedicated to World War I veterans (designed by architect **Bertram Goodhue** and created in bronze by sculptor **Lee Oscar Lawrie**). The intersection is also recognized each year when on New Year's Day, floats and marching bands in the **Rose Parade** make their famous turn for the world to see on television.

The preliminary process of launching this project has been especially painstaking. Slatoff has had to balance the passions and wishes of the soldiers' families, the guidelines and limitations of the steering committee, and his own ideas. "Mostly I've done a lot of listening," he quietly notes, while circling a rough-hewn clay head.

The son of a Seabee who stormed the shores of Guadalcanal, Slatoff has built up a rapport with the families of the fallen. A degree of mutual empathy has been cultivated. He says, "I've experienced loss in my own life, and feel compassion towards anyone who suffers."

Slatoff often listens to audiobooks as he works: Homer's *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid* of **Virgil**. He says, "I can hear those stories now and understand a level of meaning that I couldn't before. Why did it take ten years for him to come back from the war? Because it takes everyone ten years to truly return from wartime experience."

"Typically, a commission project," Slatoff explains, "takes a



*Enduring Heroes Memorial* (In progress)  
Clay 96"

Image courtesy of Dana P Bouton/DPB Photography



An assembly of photos at Slatoff Sculpture Studio paying tribute to greater Pasadena's military personal who have sacrificed their lives in the recent Middle East conflicts.

Image of courtesy of Dana P Bouton/DPB Photography



Jordi Stringfellow, Christopher Slatoff, Claire Bogaard, Former Mayor Bill Bogaard, Jaynie Studenmund, Shelly Lowe, and Rhonda Kozacik

year to move through the 'audition' process and make revisions until everyone is happy. That usually means doing a lot of work that I don't get paid for," he sighs. As an afterthought he drily adds, "My wife has had issues with that."

Improvisation is an important element in Slatoff's modus operandi. "That's the way I like it," Slatoff smiles with satisfaction. "The city wanted everything in my design worked out," he continues, with a hint of exasperation. "But if it was all nailed down, I couldn't have included all the valuable input I get from the families."

"Sometimes people will ask me something like, 'how tall will it be,'" he recounts, while pinching a bit from a moist cube of green clay. "What I've told them is, 'I don't know; we'll work that out together.'" Slatoff offers an example, "A group of family and committee members came out to Defender's Pathway and played with the positioning of the figure. One of the fathers had very specific ideas about how we would be seeing the face. I couldn't have made those kinds of adjustments in the studio."

Rhonda's countenance takes on a subtle glow as she recounts her memory of the gathering. "We saw how the sun will shine through the stars in the flag, and there were some tears." Slatoff adds, while massaging a torpedo of clay between his thumb and forefinger, "And then there's the metaphor of the soldier's head ringed by the stars."

"This has been kind of a healing process for the families," Kozacik notes, as Slatoff silently adds volume to the fold of an upturned clay pant leg. "One of the reasons we're so happy with Christopher is that he's always had an open-door policy with the families. It helps them process their loss to talk about their fallen warriors."

Slatoff stops and turns, a tone of awe creeping into his measured speech. "Sometimes I'll be working away," he says, his eyes scanning the far wall, "and there'll be a banging on the door. And it'll be the father of **Marine Lance Corporal Rogelio Ramirez**; he just likes to come hang out and talk. We'll have a beer and spend some time together and you can just tell what kind of man he is." The light catches the smudges on the lenses as he reverently adds, "You'd want him in your foxhole."

What has the project given Slatoff? "I've depicted faith, fatherhood, and love before," he points out. "But I've never talked about heroism in my work. This project will undoubtedly touch everything I do subsequently."

Kozacik adds that the families of the soldiers who are being honoured are behind the project "190%." The completed Enduring Heroes Memorial will be unveiled in a public ceremony honouring veterans and the families of the fallen on May 29, 2017.

"I'm on well-trod ground," Slatoff allows, "and that's my biggest problem. I had to figure out how to make this honorific and universal, yet still be personal and individual. I can take all of those emotions and give them form. I hope my work gives those families some comfort." "Some people wanted an abstract image but these are real people we're talking about," he asserts. "The more I can personalize it, the more it means to the families." 📷

#### Notes:

**Kirk Silsbee** writes about jazz and culture, and has written about art since 1990. His articles appear in various publications including *Los Angeles Times*, *San Gabriel Valley News Press*, and *DownBeat Magazine*. Silsbee is known primarily as a music journalist, and has degrees in drawing and painting.



Christopher Slatoff sculpting "Enduring Heroes Memorial"  
Image courtesy of Dana P Bouton/DPB Photography