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LOOKING for a RESURRECTION

Boosters of Desert Christ Park are scrambling to save dozens of crumbling biblical statues.

By **MARK MUCKENFUSS**

STAFF WRITER

Concrete statues of Jesus, his disciples and other biblical figures have been standing in a Yucca Valley park for 60 years.

But the desert's sun, wind, rain and occasional vandals have not been kind to the larger-than-life sculptures created by Frank Antone Martin.

The little children whom Jesus suffered to come unto him are suffering from a lack of legs. Their weathered bodies are perched atop spindles of rebar that Martin used as the foundation for his pieces. All that remains of Lazarus, the man Jesus brought back from the dead, is a ragged pedestal.

"It's sad that the park is disappearing and nobody seems to care," said Angela Leggett, 70, a local resident and secretary of the Desert Christ Park Foundation.

It's not exactly true that no one cares. Leggett does. So does Roxanne Miller, president of the foundation. The two women are leading a campaign to raise funds to repair and restore the park's statues. They figure they need \$100,000 to do the job right. Since November, they have raised \$200.

"The churches aren't very interested either," Leggett said.

"They're starting to be," Miller countered.

The two women are among those who believe that Martin's work is worth preserving as part of Yucca Valley's identity.

"It's well-known to people all over the world," Miller said. "It's a piece of the past I think needs to be preserved and carried forward into the future."

Miller, 54, first recalls coming to Christ Park when she was about 4. Her grandparents lived in Yucca Valley and her grandmother would walk with her along the dirt paths of the 2½-acre plot in the rocky hills west of Highway 62, and tell her the stories that went with the scenes depicted above this small desert town.

A large Romanesque façade is etched with an image of the Last Supper. A recreation of the Sermon on the Mount includes figures of the 12 disciples, including Judas, who has his back turned and is holding a small bag of coins. Higher on the hill, Jesus, along with Peter, James and John, are positioned as if in the Garden of Gethsemane.

On a higher hill to the south is a solitary figure of Jesus with his arms raised. That statue will be the focal point of the local Easter sunrise service, which draws about 200 people to an amphitheater built into the hillside.

"The sun comes up over the hill and hits Christ first," Roxanne said.

The statue was once known as the Unwanted Jesus.

Martin had constructed the 10-foot-high, 3-ton sculpture in his backyard in Inglewood. He wanted to place it on the rim of Grand Canyon, according to one account, but the Park Service turned him down. So did everyone else, it seems.

Finally, someone called the Rev. Eddie Garver's attention to it. Garver had a church near where the statue now stands. He decided it would be perfect for his flock.

Life magazine covered the 1951 trek that brought the statue to Yucca Valley and published photos of the ropebound figure being wrestled up the hill using a block-and-tackle technique.

Martin followed the statue with the Jesus and Peter figures that appear in the Sermon on the Mount scene. They also were built in Inglewood and transported to the desert. In 1952, Martin, a weapon systems pattern maker for an

aerospace company, retired and moved to Yucca Valley. He lived in a trailer near the park site.

One story that appeared in a Long Beach paper in the 1950s said Martin feared an atomic war and built the statues of reinforced concrete because he believed they would survive a nuclear blast.

Multiple sources from the time indicate that Martin wanted to bring a message of peace to the world. Not only did that turn out to be harder than he expected, but just finding peace with his neighbor was a challenge.

Garver was pleased to have more statuary popping up around his church. But it wasn't long before he and Martin ran into trouble. It's unclear what caused the friction between the two men, but they had a falling out. The townspeople seem to have sided with Martin.

"Eddie Garver was almost run out of town," said Miller.

With the exception of the original statue, the Last Supper and a scene depicting the tomb after Christ's resurrection, Martin moved his statues off Garver's land and onto the current park site at 56200 Sunnyslope Drive in Yucca Valley, which a local businessman had donated to him. He continued working until his death in 1961.

For a while, the town took care of Martin's work. But an ACLU lawsuit forced officials to divest the town from the park. The foundation was formed. In the 1990s, after the Landers earthquake, money was raised to repair some of the damaged statues.

Miller said more needs to be done. One restorer gave the foundation an estimate of \$86,000 to fix the pieces. An additional \$10,000 is needed to fix a building with two bathrooms that is boarded up.

The foundation's budget this year, Miller said, is less than \$4,000. Those funds come from private donors, an annual Easter Egg hunt and a treasure hunt at the park at Christmas.

Miller and Leggett said they have been speaking to local service clubs and church groups, but without much success.

"Advertising is everything," Leggett said, "and we don't even have enough money to put out a sign."

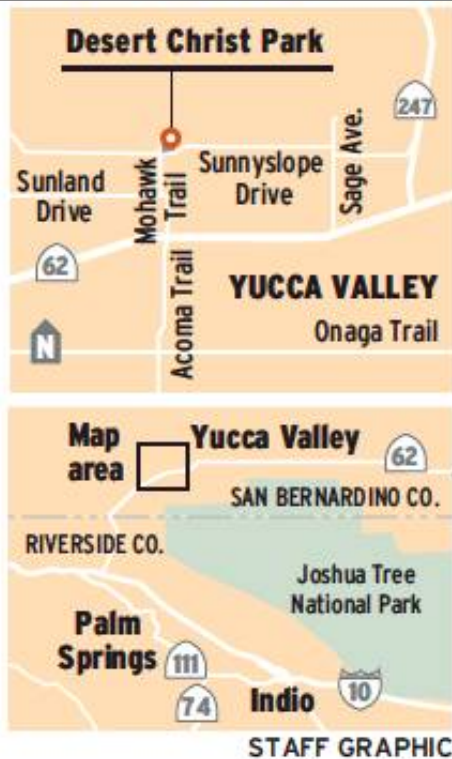
Some residents don't even know about the park, Miller said. But they're trying to change that. They hope that once they get a substantial donor to their cause, it will encourage others to give.

"Right now, it's crumbling down to the ground and we don't have enough people to lift it back up," Leggett said. "It's sad that the park is disappearing and nobody seems to care."



RODRIGO PEÑA, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Roxanne Miller, left, and Angela Leggett of the Desert Christ Park Foundation want to raise \$100,000 to revitalize Desert Christ Park in Yucca Valley, where concrete sculptures are based on the Bible. This scene is the "Blessing of Children."



Easter events

Desert Christ Park will host a sunrise service, as it has done since the 1950s, followed by its annual Easter egg hunt

When: Sunrise service at 6 a.m.; Easter egg hunt at 8.

Address: 56200 Sunnyslope Drive, Yucca Valley

Admission: Free

Contact: Desert Christ Park Foundation: desertchristpark.org, 760-365-3984



PHOTOS: RODRIGO PEÑA, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Frank Antone Martin created these Bible-based concrete sculptures that sit at Desert Christ Park in Yucca Valley. The above scene is the “Sermon on the Mount.”



This Martha sculpture is missing an arm. That's better than the Lazarus statue, which is missing, well, everything: Only part of the pedestal remains, at Martha's left.