

Foundation works to heal Desert Christ Park

Juli Alsadi Hi-Desert Star | Posted: Friday, March 18, 2016 7:31 pm

More than 60 years after Antone Martin's Jesus statue first raised its arms on a hill overlooking Yucca Valley, a nonprofit group is hoping to restore Martin's park of sculptures and bring it back into the public eye.

Martin created the 10-foot-tall, three-ton cement statue of Jesus Christ at his home in Inglewood in hopes of displaying it on the rim of the Grand Canyon. That dream was quickly dashed by the parks service, but Martin came to know a Yucca Valley man then called the Desert Parson, Eddie Garver. Garver owned property and had a vision for the sculpture, which the two men transported to the Hi-Desert and dedicated at a sunrise service on Easter Sunday 1951.

Martin moved to the area and lived in a trailer on location while he created more than 40 snow-white statues and images portraying Christ's life and teachings.

The park was once maintained by the county, but an ACLU lawsuit settled in 1992 ended public funding, just prior to the 7.3 Landers earthquake, which caused a great deal of damage. In 1996 the nonprofit Desert Christ Park Foundation was formed and cleaned up the site with a crew of volunteers, including youth groups from the neighboring Evangelical Free Church.

The foundation operates with a budget of about \$4,000 per year, which has proven to be inadequate to compete against weather and vandals, and many of the statues are crumbling.

"We've gotten an estimate to make needed repairs at the park, and it will cost around \$86,000 to fix the statues," Secretary Angela Leggett said. "We would also like to repair the picnic and storage area so there are restrooms available on site, which will cost another \$15,000."

Since the foundation began its fundraising campaign, \$200 has been raised.

"The park is a piece of history that is known to people all over the world," said foundation President Roxanne Miller. "Our goal is to get the word out about the needs for restoration, before this beautiful, peaceful location is lost entirely."

The foundation hosts events at the park to raise awareness and community involvement, including a



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After park lines were re-drawn, this enormous sculpture was moved from the hillside behind the amphitheatre to its current location

treasure hunt at Christmas and an Easter egg hunt on the grounds following the sunrise service at the Evangelical Free Church Amphitheater. This year will mark the 65th anniversary of services at the location and the public is invited to attend.

For more information on the park and how you can help, visit the website at www.DesertChristPark.org.