

‘Proud Warrior Spirits’

Riverside National Cemetery in California will be the home of the new American Indian Veterans Memorial

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After many years of planning, Native American veterans are set to be recognized for their military service to the nation. Riverside National Cemetery in Riverside, California, is the future home of the American Indian Veterans Memorial, the first of its kind.

Since 2005, plans for the memorial have been in development. On March 14, then-VFW Department of California Commander Dawn Napier presented a \$50,000 check to the Riverside National Cemetery Support Committee and the American Indian Alaska Native Veterans Memorial Committee to assist with the installation of “The Gift,” the title of the memorial’s sculpture.

“When we made the donation, it put them right at what they needed for the statue to be placed in the cemetery,” Napier said. “However, when they went to start the process for installation, the price had nearly doubled. Unfortunately, they now have to raise another \$750,000 to have it placed in the cemetery.”

With rising costs and supply chain issues, in addition to COVID-19 delays, the committee has found it next to impossible for its fundraising endeavors to compete with inflation, Napier said.

The two partnering committees hope to have the sculpture installed by March 2023. It will sit on the east side of the small lake near the cemetery’s main entrance.

For Napier, a Native American and member of the Kurak Tribe, this memorial is long overdue.

“The statue represents the true Native American,” said Napier, a member of VFW Post 9561 in Hoopa, California. “Not the public perception that we are drunken Indians or that we are rich because we own casinos. It says we are proud warrior spirits.”

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When Napier was elected Department commander, she asked to see the “The Gift,” sculpted by A. Thomas Schomberg. Napier made her way to the maintenance yard at Riverside National Cemetery where the statue was located, waiting to be installed for all to see.

“I was overwhelmed when I saw it,” Napier said. “It really hit me hard in my heart to see it.”

She asked the Department of California Council of Administration about the possibility of donating to the memorial, and Council reps agreed.

The twice-life-sized statue is cloaked in the nation’s first flag, the Continental Flag. Organizers say it is intended to present the more than 250 years that American Indian patriots have served to protect our country.

Two life-sized tribute eagles, one on either side of the pathway entrance, will mark the entry to the American Indian Veterans Memorial. The eagles were sculpted by Mike Curtis.

“There is not another memorial like this anywhere,” Napier said. “Riverside National Cemetery is known as ‘Arlington of the West’ because when Arlington is full, Riverside will be able to bury vets for the next 100 years. It is only fitting that this memorial should be located here.”

For more information on the American Indian Veterans Memorial and its progress, visit www.rncsc.org or www.AIANveteransmemorial.com.

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