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SCENE: Remembrance through art, song and sermon

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Tuesday, May 20, 2008

A new look at Memorial Day
By Ann Larson

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In the spring of 2006, Annette Roberts-Gray displayed her memorial vases at an Anderson Ranch exhibition. Each one is unique and represents a fallen soldier in the Iraq War. Sometimes she gets a photograph of the soldier from the surviving family and creates each vase to be a figurative representation of the soldier stamped with the name, service branch insignia, age and date of death.
Photo courtesy Annette Roberts-Gray

For most people, Memorial Day has become just the third day of a federal three-day weekend. This unofficial start of summer which now falls on the last Monday in May was originally called Decoration Day and was held each year on May 30.

At first, it was observed by putting flowers on the graves of the fallen Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery after the end of America's deadly Civil War. Following World War I, Memorial Day was changed to honor Americans who died fighting in any war and it spread throughout the country to include parades to honor the dead.

Now instead of going to a cemetery or parade in remembrance of those who sacrificed their lives for their country, we head to the mountains or the beach, have a picnic with family and friends or just party.

But our soldiers are still dying. They are dying in Iraq and Afghanistan. And some people still remember and honor their sacrifice.

On Sunday, May 25, at 9 a.m. at the Snowmass Chapel, sacrifice, whether for love or for country, will be the focal point for a very special event, which includes a sermon by pastor Charis Caldwell, a song written by Nickel Creek and a peace memorial by ceramic artist Annette Roberts-Gray of Glenwood Springs.

Thinking of the fallen U.S. soldiers in the Iraq War, Roberts-Gray began making ceramic vases in memory of and to honor those who have died in this conflict. Each white vase is stamped with the name, age, service branch insignia and date of death of a soldier who died in Iraq.

"It is a reminder of the individual sacrifice and the cost of war. I have made nearly 1,000 of the vases. I start with about a pound of clay, form each one on my potters' wheel, and then alter them to give them their shape. While making the vases, I find the names to be very remarkable - how so many names have come from other languages and cultures, proving America to be such a rich "melting pot." I think a lot about what the parents must have felt in choosing the name for their child," she said.

Initially she intended to make a unique vase for each fallen soldier of the Iraq War, but the project became overwhelming as the war continues and the casualty list increases. Though she still makes the vases by request of surviving families, her body of work has become part of installations that have been on display in the nation's capital and throughout the country. Currently, there is an installation of memorial vases at the Colorado Mountain College office in Glenwood Springs.

Many of the vases will be on display at the Snowmass Chapel's Sunday service this Memorial Day weekend.

The concept for this special remembrance service came from the Chapel's music director, Paul Dankers. He met the artist when she took a vocal class from him at Colorado Mountain College-Aspen. It seemed that her works would mesh with the Christian idea of sacrifice.

"I asked if she was willing to do her show at the chapel. We chose Memorial Day weekend. It could not be more apropos," he said.

During the service, another one of Dankers' vocal students, Jinny Bahr, will sing the Nickel Creek ballad "The Hand Song" about a young boy who learns about love and sacrifice at his mother's knee. As a young soldier years later, he sacrifices his life in a war for a comrade.

For Christians, the ultimate sacrifice was the death of Jesus on the cross.

"The classic formulation for Christians at communion is, 'Do this in remembrance of me.'" Memory and remembering is part of every faith. Each one is constantly retelling stories, so that they are remembered," said Reverend Caldwell.

In her sermon on Sunday, she will talk about the Christian concept of sacrifice to help illuminate the meaning of Memorial Day.

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“Christianity remembers the sacrifice made in behalf of love. Memorial Day remembers the sacrifices of people for their country,” she said.

For those who have listened to the voices of many of the soldiers in Iraq who have put their lives on the line in the conflict, it is often heard that their motivation in doing something heroic in the moment is the love for their fellow soldiers, more than for military or nationalistic reasons. This is also the theme of “The Hand Song.”

Revered Caldwell sees biblical connections to Roberts-Gray’s memorial vases. In Genesis God creates the first man from dirt, which was called “adamah.” At his death, Adam returns to dirt. From dust to dust is the well-known phrase to sum up our short, fleeting lives.

The memorial vases are clay or dirt representations of the unique soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq.

After the non-denominational service from 9 to 10 a.m., there will be fellowship time with light refreshments and a chance to view the memorial vases and to talk to the artist.

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