

## Laguna memorial to honor sacrifices of police officers



Laguna Beach artists Michele Taylor and Gerard Stripling have collaborated on public art pieces in the past.

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When passers-by walk outside the Laguna Beach Police Department, they will forever remember two fallen heroes who lost their lives serving their city, 60 years apart.

Last month, city arts commissioners chose two local artists to create a permanent outdoor memorial outside the police department that honors the officers: Jon Coutchie, who died in September while responding to a call when his police motorcycle collided with a pickup truck, and Gordon French, who in 1953 was shot and killed by a suspect attempting to escape from the police station.



Motorcycle Officer Jon Coutchie died in a collision with a pickup truck in September.

The officers are the only two Laguna Beach police officers to die in the line of duty. Coutchie, an Army veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, was 42 at the time of his death. French was 48.

In honor of the fallen officers as well as current police officers, local artists Gerard Stripling, 48, and Michele Taylor, 40, will create a 7-foot-high by 7-foot-wide bronze sculpture representing a flame as part of a memorial piece titled "Eternal Legacy." The heart of the piece will be an eternal flame of illuminated resin.

The design will allow people to sit together or quietly by themselves, and be partly protected by the main sculpture.

The Laguna Beach Police Employees' Association led fundraising efforts to finance the project, gathering \$70,000 to grant the artists, with \$10,000 coming in a matching fund from the city.

Stripling and Taylor, who have both been living in Laguna Beach for the past 14 years, have collaborated on public art pieces before, such as a limestone-and-resin embellished bench outside the city's senior center, but never one with such emotional and historical significance to the community.

The Arts Commission chose their design from a group of four finalists.

“I was very struck when Larry Bammer, president of the Laguna Beach Police (Employees’) Association, was speaking at the Arts Commission meeting” said Taylor. “He said that when he imagined our design he remembered his friends, also in duty and honor, as well as the friend he lost, in the eternal flame. I was so honored to see him already visualize the impact of this piece.”

Surrounding the sculpture will be three internally illuminated stone, bronze and cast-glass benches that will each include cast-glass inserts with the officers’ badge numbers.



Laguna Beach police Officers Larry Bammer, left, and Jesstin Schmidt salute as the name of fallen Officer Jon Coutchie is added to the Peace Officers Memorial during ceremonies in Sacramento on Monday. The Laguna Beach Police Department is in the process of creating its own memorial for its fallen officers.



Gerard Stripling and Michele Taylor's "Eternal Legacy," seen in a model, features a flame made of illuminated resin.

Stripling and Taylor say they hope the benches serve as a public reminder of the duties and service of all public safety officers, and as a private space of remembrance for the officers’ loved ones.

The city hopes to see the memorial completed in time for the one-year observance of Coutchie’s death in September.

## Q&A WITH ARTISTS

### Q. What inspired you to make your design?

**Michele:** First and foremost, we were inspired by the officers' courage and sacrifice. We wanted to create a memorial setting that allows for the remembrance of these brave officers and celebrates their lives, and is a place for the community and family to reflect on their lives and accomplishments.

### Q. What were some ideas that you might have had early on in the process but decided not to use?

**Michele:** The content for the idea was always there because the inspiration never changes, but we went through a couple of different iterations. The shape initially was a two curved parts, with other curved elements like the benches that would form more of a circle. When we started to work through and look at a model, we wanted something a bit more cohesive to the site and used more of the site space. We wanted private areas for reflection. In our version now, people can sit together or quietly by themselves, and they can be semi-protected by the main sculpture.

### **Q. What's it like working in a pair?**

**Michele:** Although our aesthetics and style is different, when we collaborate there's what I like to call a "third mind."

**Gerard:** We both bring our own separate ideas for a particular project or element, and one of her ideas will spur one of mine, that will spur hers, ideas build to this really. As a result, it's a true collaboration. We wouldn't get there on our own.

### **Q. Why do you choose to live and work in Laguna Beach?**

**Gerard:** My wife always liked Laguna Beach, and when she showed me the city, I realized not only was it a great place to live and raise kids, but it was somewhere that supported the arts, so I found it a perfect location. The city continues to offer opportunities for artists and their families, and is a great community where everyone comes together and rallies for other members. It's great as artists coming together to honor one of our fallen officers, in for the community year-round.

**Michele:** I was drawn to the Laguna Beach artist community. I have chosen to live and work here 14 years, and feel privileged with a support system of artists, of friends, colleagues.

### **Q. How did you meet each other?**

**Gerard:** We met back in the summer of 2000 when we both were showing at the Sawdust Art Festival. Michele and her friend were hanging a piece and I immediately introduced myself to her because I liked her work.

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