

Are We There Yet?

Journey to Hamlet, NC

By Dan Bellan, CM

Greetings, fellow memorialists. I've been invited to write a column for *MB News* that will appear every other month in this magazine. The title *Are We There Yet?* conveys a purposeful direction that imbues a sense of adventure. It suggests our industry is looking forward and implies that there is never any final destination; it's the journey that matters. The plan is to take readers on explorations into the future of our industry. By looking at who's doing what out there and what types of technical advancements are occurring, we will stay focused on the future. We need to keep the creative aspect of our industry alive because this ensures we contribute to the culture in which we live. It also forces us to make sound business decisions to guarantee the future of our industry and our place in it.

In a way, *Are We There Yet?* will act like a hardcopy blog. I'd like to involve MBNA members and others, such as cemetery operators and planners, sculptors, architects, and funeral directors to participate in this forum. We begin the first leg of our journey in Hamlet, North Carolina, where the late saxophonist John Coltrane was born in September of 1926. To me, Coltrane represents the epitome of dedication and commitment to a craft, to an art. We can all learn from his search to express himself and how he shared his ideas to influence the wider world. The best story I heard about him was that he took an old broomstick handle, cut it down, and notched into it the exact positioning for the tone holes of his soprano saxophone. While traveling from gig to gig by plane, train and automobile, he would pull out his broomstick handle and practice, soundlessly, for hours at a time.

Because our industry deals with the essence of life, in order for us as memorialists to excel and progress in our craft, the same degree of concentrated effort is required. Coltrane, like Mozart, was a master improviser, never playing the same thing more than once, but always knowing that the improvisa-



tion has to accompany the theme. It's important that we each find our unique voice or style of design. Like Coltrane, we need to understand our audience, and we need to push the boundaries of conventions and traditions and forge new paths ahead.

A first step to the commitment of our craft could be enrolling in MBNA's Certified Memorialist program, which gives the distinction of recognized expertise in our field. If you're reluctant to take the challenge because of concerns that the certification process will be costly, time-consuming and difficult, you're right. But it's worth the effort. Taking the course signifies your commitment; renewing your credentials every three years signifies your dedication.

Working in isolation narrows our vision. Pay a visit to other monument shops in your area to see what new directions and strategies are being

implemented. When you're traveling for business or pleasure, make the time to check out local cemeteries. Whether Miami or Juneau, you never know what you're going to find, and that's what it's all about. Send me some photos of what you find interesting and why.

Another form of commitment involves getting out in your community and meeting people who are linked directly or indirectly with commemorative art. For example, in Vancouver where I live, I associate with local sculptors and occasionally speak at the British Columbia Sculptor's Society, giving slide show presentations about cemetery art and various stone structures I have photographed from around the world. The Society loves the presentations, but more importantly, I learn from them. During discussions at the meetings and at different studios, the amazing thing is that I always bring home way more ideas than I started out with. These activities keep me fresh and challenged.

Being committed to our craft means getting out of our comfort zones, and, just like Coltrane, practicing until we get good at it—until we find our own unique voice. The fruits of discovery may flower spontaneously, but they will only bloom if we have tended our territory properly. And once we've bloomed, mastered that new technique, being committed means starting again, learning something new, and not being afraid to make "mistakes," because there are none. ■

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About the Author

Dan Bellan, CM, who is originally from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, has been a resident of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, for the past 20 years. No stranger to the pages of the *MB News*, he's a recent contributor to the February and March issues and other well-known industry publications. With this issue, however, Dan is becoming a regular columnist (bi-monthly). With a degree in chemical engineering, Dan soon found that the corporate world of engineering wasn't hands-on enough for him, and he came into the monument industry full-time in 1994. A self-styled "Renaissance Man," he enjoys creative endeavors, such as painting and writing music. Traveling is a passion he and his wife share, and what Dan sees in his travels and in the everyday world around him greatly influences his creative processes. As he says, "Life is a journey, and the world is a very big place." He'd rather spend more time reading an atlas than watching television. Dan is such an interesting individual that we plan to share his personal career journey in a future issue.



**Calling All Certified Memorialists:
Please Submit Photos for New "CM Spotlight"**

As an additional way of calling attention to the latest and best in design, MB News is considering the introduction of a new feature, "CM Spotlight," that would serve as a "gallery" to highlight the most recent memorials, monuments or other work (such as works for municipal office park or subdivision entry ways or office building interiors) created by MBNA's Certified Memorialists. We encourage CMs to submit digital color photos (dpi of 300 or greater) and some brief information. Please be sure you have permission to submit the work for consideration for publication.

Forms are available by contacting the editor. You may submit materials without using the form, but please be sure you provide the following contact information: Your name; company; location (city/state); phone number (including area code); e-mail address.

Please provide the following information about work you are submitting for publication: (1) Purpose of the work; (2) the steps you took in arriving at the design of this work (such as meeting with family members, developers, building owners, committees, focused research, etc.); (4) composition of the memorial; (5) any special techniques used in its creation; (6) dimensions; (7) completion date; and (8) any additional information that is pertinent.

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Dan Bellan, CM, who's becoming a regular columnist in this issue, designed this "Heaven and Earth" pillar, which stands alongside a path in the Boal Chapel Cremation Garden in North Vancouver. The monument has a small footprint, and is a natural local stone (Brohm - a hard stone similar to basalt) that has been hand-textured to compliment the natural appearance of a forest environment. The pillar is about 38-in. in height and about 6-in. inches in width and approximately 7-in. in diameter. Two Japanese characters, representing heaven and earth, are incised into the honed face of the pillar. A small bronze bird sculpture (designed by Theophil Steinbrenner of Strassacker KG) symbolically represents the human soul ready to depart upwards, but still rooted on earth. Some flat chisel work around the bird represents the nest. The face of the pillar has been hand-textured with a criss-cross chisel, 9-point chisel and frosting chisel to give a soft, illuminated appearance surrounding the two Japanese characters.



April 2007 • Vol. 64, No. 4

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MB News (ISSN 0192-2491) is published monthly by *Monument Builders of North America* (MBNA), 900 Fox Valley Drive, Suite 100, Longwood, FL 32779-2552. Periodical postage-paid at Longwood, Florida and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER - Send address changes to *MB News*, 900 Fox Valley Drive, Suite 100, Longwood, FL 32779-2552. Telephone: +1.800.233.4472; FAX: +1.407.774.6751. E-mail: info@monumentbuilders.org

Web: www.monumentbuilders.org
Closing date: Four weeks preceding date of publication. We reserve the right to accept or reject any advertising or editorial material. Subscription rate is \$70 annually for members, which is included in the annual membership dues. The rate for non-member subscriptions or additional subscriptions requested by MBNA members is \$125 a year. Single issue price is \$12.

Mission

To define and promote memorialization in a viable, innovative and diversified way for the membership and to enhance the awareness of memorialization by the general public and the remembrance industry.