

‘It Will Always Be About Preserving History’

A Vietnam War veteran and VFW member from Ohio unveiled his latest mural on Veterans Day 2021 in hopes of continuing a decade-long pursuit to both preserve military history and promote local artists in his hometown

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When Vietnam War veteran John Sekletar set out to honor those who fought for freedom and country, he wanted to do so by fusing his passion for art and military history.

An Amherst, Ohio, native in tune with the town’s art scene, he created the Amherst Veterans Mural Association Committee in 2010 to fund murals created by local artists wanting to preserve military history for younger generations.

“I wanted to support local artists and the history each military painting carries,” said Sekletar, a member of VFW Post 1662 who deployed to Vietnam in 1972 as a machinist’s mate 3rd class aboard the USS Saratoga (CVS-60). “It will always be about preserving history and promoting the arts.”

With the creation of the committee, comprised of local residents that include veterans from VFW Post 1662, the American Legion and civilians such as Sekletar’s wife, Cathy, Amherst residents began seeing murals pop up by 2011.

It began with the unveiling of a mural on Veterans Day in 2011 by Sekletar’s son, Mike, which depicted the U.S. flag raising on Iwo Jima during World War II. Mike painted the mural along an office building wall in downtown Amherst then owned by attorney Frank J. Janik III.

For the next several years, hundreds gathered on Veterans Day for new unveilings, which included a “Reflections” mural for Vietnam veterans in 2013, a Korean War mural in 2015

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406 W. 34th Street
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Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

and a “War on Terror” mural in 2017 for veterans who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But as the building walls filled with patriotic imagery by 2017, Sekletar had to find another avenue. It was Cathy who later suggested that the next mural be Amherst’s Patriots Park, which sits behind the office building already filled with murals.

“We wanted it to be an extension of what we had already begun doing,” Sekletar said. “But I also wanted it to be an ongoing thing, a mural carrying 11 new paintings by 11 local artists each year on Veterans Day.”

After a year-and-a-half of planning and requesting permits from the city of Amherst, the committee received approval in 2021 for Sekletar’s magnum opus.

With seven weeks to raise \$40,000 and create the mural in Patriots Park that Sekletar wanted before Veterans Day 2021, the committee began fundraising. They received large labor contributions from Morain Stone & Tile, Sandstone Trucking & Excavating, as well as donations from others such as VFW Post 1662, UAW Local 2000, Melendez Home Video and U.S. Sports Video in Amherst.

“They all care about the veterans,” Sekletar said. “Every one of these guys cares, and that’s why we’re doing the project. It’s not about the money. It’s about doing a job.”

When Sekletar unveiled the 68-footlong, 8-foot-tall sandstone mural on Nov. 11, 2021, hundreds of local and traveling spectators flocked to Patriots Park for the showcase.

The first 11 paintings in the mural, which Sekletar hopes to annually replenish with new art, came from seven local artists commissioned by the committee. Among the 11 paintings displayed, spectators also could see depictions of the Statue of Liberty, brothers who served in the military and a Vietnam War-era soldier handing out candy to children.

With each depiction being a labor of love to veterans and local artists, Sekletar added that, after a year on display, each painting will then be auctioned and awarded to the highest bidder.

“It’s been a decade of advocating for these projects, but it doesn’t feel like work,” Sekletar said. “If you have a passion, talk about it to everyone. Remember, it takes a village.”

This article is featured in the 2022 March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.