

## “Moments of Silence,” Art Installation Marks Iraq War

By Sarah Goodman (July, 2004)

Summer begins the noisy season on Peaks Island. This Memorial Day, it also started an answering silence. One island artist decided to make her home a living poem to the soldiers who have died in Iraq. Susan Webster simply wanted to pay attention, to attend the absence of 805 lives, as the season of parades and flags kicked off. “It became too much for me. I had to do something.”

First, she called it “805 <plus> Moments of Silence,” knowing the number would change, and she would come, with a bigger and bigger marker, to write new numbers. Then, she fed the name, rank, age, and smiling portrait of each soldier through her printer and cut out individual listings, like mailing labels. She then cut long white strips of sheer thin-mil compostable leaf bags. She knotted each six-foot-by-two-inch strip to a line of nylon twine, strung through a stand of poplars along Pleasant Avenue. Side-by-side, the strands stage-whisper the breeze, riding a constant wave, blown up by every beat of air.

The bags are cornstarch. “In rain, they get sticky,” says Webster, who every day adds strands and separates tangles in the ghostly fringe. At a distance, you can read green circles of factory-stamped letters: compostable, biodegradable. Each strip is tagged with the name and photo of a soldier, at eye level.

Islanders walking on Pleasant Avenue, first take in her neighbor’s poppies and blue-flag irises, and next, the poet’s ledge-ridged lawn. Then, the waving, weeping curtain calls. Some pass by. Some step over, read some of the names, see some of the 900 confident, young faces, untangle some, hold in suddenly god-like fingers, these children. We witness how quickly weather erases them, stare at a face even when it isn’t there.

The curtain brushes a stone wall. Two telephone poles bear the changing numbers that only increase. On our side of the wall, a water jug, cups, tipped-over vases, curling flowers, and a grid of woven strips spread out. Webster calls it “A place to stand, a place to feel how connected and grounded we are, and they can’t be. . . . It’s a baby quilt. It’s a small comforter.”

When I stand there, comfort expands with grief. Roger Dutton mows his lawn. Cut grass sprays up scent. The ritual of viewing Moments allows a meeting and an embrace, but also presents the impossibility of meeting. Of the 900 lives, I can only be with a handful, briefly. For each soldier, absence is all we have. Private First Class Analaura Esparza-Gutierrez, 21, didn’t mow the lawn today, board a bus, hold a door, nor will she tomorrow.

After the June 30 turnover date, the work was supposed to come down. With renewed frustration, Webster decided, "They're still over there. They keep dying. Nothing's changed." She added a piece that day, which she had not known how to create.

Having no names or pictures, she boxed off a red casket shape, hanging off the twine, marked it "Censored Information." She hung a model: 11.5 strips in a flat banner, labeled Iraqi, facing 1 strip labeled Coalition. "That's just a guess. That's the low end of the estimates," she explains. "If I put an actual strip for each Iraqi that's died in this war, they'd stretch half around the island." The section for the Iraqis she describes as "Different rhythmically. It has a really deep beat. It flies a lot higher."

Visitors appeared at the site over July 4, in droves and in tears. One mother attached a note to one soldier's strand, thanking the "angel" who hung it. There are also nighttime drive-by's, people shouting angrily at the home and the work. Moments never stops its gentle waving.

Webster plans to take the piece down on September 10, and install it for a one-night show at Gem Gallery, 62 Island Avenue. After that night, she would like to send it to another caretaker. She is exploring possible options; it will likely leave the island. Though 100 feet long, the work can be moved easily. It weighs next to nothing.

Here on Peaks, last year, a young man returned from Iraq. The island passed around a sheet. Yard to yard, we took paint-pen markers. We wore out the colors. We wrote, over and over, his name, and Welcome Home, and Thank You. This summer, Moments provides a homecoming for Marine Corporal Mark Evnin, 21, Specialist Richard Arriaga, 20; Sergeant Michael Emerson Yashinski, 24, and 12,650 plus others who have died in Iraq.

In just one of the uncountable, un-lived moments, sunlight and my eyes, a shadow of apple leaves, a ladybug, and the constant tug of air welcome Brandon Tobler, 19, and the knot that holds him to the line.