



# the HANDS

The hands of 500 North Carolinians are displayed in the park. One stands out.

STORY BY **ALLISON WILLIAMS**  
PHOTOS BY **JAMES ROBINSON**

Before the first steel beams of the park were hoisted into place there were the hands. Dozens of them, then hundreds — weathered, smooth, delicate, broad. Wized old men, battle-hardened fighters, sank their arms elbow deep in goo. Proper ladies put palms face down on wet concrete as artists in ratty aprons coached, encouraged and listened to the stories. For months, the process was repeated from the North Carolina coast to the mountains until

the hands of 500 people, five from all 100 counties, were cast.

500 hands, thousands of stories.

One hand in the North Carolina Veterans Park is different from the rest. It belongs to Dale Wilson, a good ol' boy who lives on a farm in Troutman not far from the place where he was born and signed up for the Marines in 1968. When Iredell County's veterans services officer thought about the many men and women who served, his mind immediately went to Wilson. Every county chose one veteran for the Wall of Oath and four other people

as supporters — some veterans, others family members or community leaders — for columns that are covered in cement relief handprints. But the "oath hands" would all be cast in bronze, one hand, a right hand, raised as if taking the oath of enlistment or office, the ceremony that unites all members of the military.

Brad Stroud had a problem in Iredell County. His veteran, the one he had his heart set on, did not have a right hand. "Dale Wilson was a Marine who, in Vietnam, lost three limbs. He lost his right arm to the shoulder and both legs."



**Top left photo:**  
Molds of veterans' hands were cast in bronze for display at the North Carolina Veterans Park. All 100 counties are represented on the Wall of Oath.

**Top right:**  
Bronze is poured at Carolina Bronze near Seagrove.

**Bottom:**  
Jim White, left, and Bill Ross wear protective suits to guard against the intense heat.





Photo by James Robinson

World War II veteran **Ed Middleton**, whose hand is pictured on the cover of this issue, is one of five people to represent Cumberland County in the park.



Photo by Diane Hughes

10-year-old **Morgan Brooks** of Rutherford County has her hand cast for the North Carolina Veterans Park.



Photo by Diane Hughes

Visitors will find female veterans represented in the park including **Katherine Fletcher** of Lincoln County.



Photo by Diane Hughes

Artist Soni Martin makes a mold of **Dale Wilson's** left hand. Out of 500 right hands in the park, his will be the only left hand. Wilson, a Marine Corps veteran, lost three of his limbs in the Vietnam War.



World War II veteran James Crump of Union County. Photo by Diane Hughes

At first, park planners told Stroud no, absolutely not. But Stroud persisted. "What greater sacrifice could there be?" he said recently.

Artist and Fayetteville State University professor Soni Martin stepped in. When the park opens, Stroud says, it will have "499 right hands and one left hand."

"Now you're going to have young kids asking, 'Why is there a left hand?' It's a wonderful chance for whoever, curators or volunteers, to say, not only can you lose your life, you can lose parts of yourself, whether it's mental or physical."

As for Dale Wilson, he tried his hardest to convince Stroud that there were other people more deserving of a place in the park. He's one of the blessed, he said.

More than 40 years

have passed since Wilson was injured in Vietnam but not a week goes by, he said, that someone fails to stop him, at the grocery store or the post office, to thank him for his service.

"I was walking second that day," he said. He was carrying an M79 grenade launcher for another Marine, a man who had been injured, when a booby trap exploded in his path. Today, he finds himself giving advice to a new generation of soldiers and Marines returning from war as amputees.

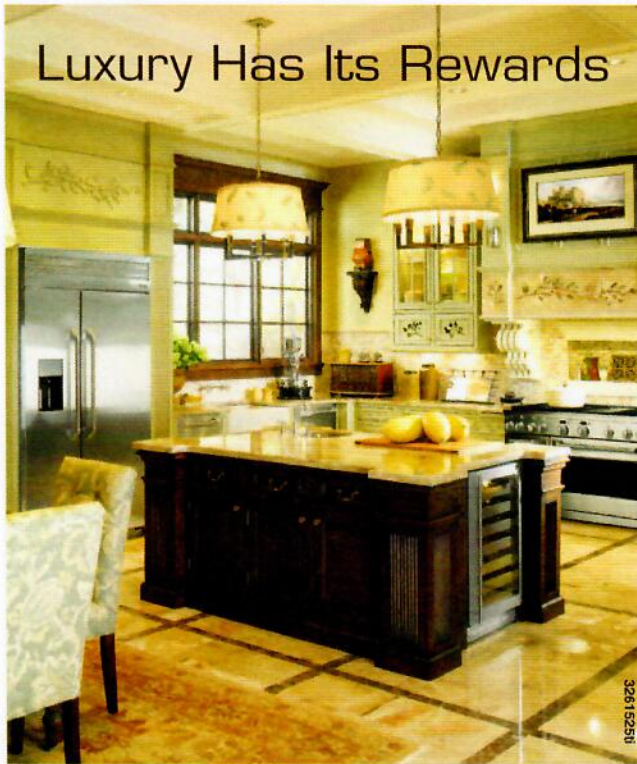
"We weren't setting out to be different," Stroud said. But it turned out to be a lesson in the definition of service.

#### Helping hands

Ed Middleton's hands are creased, a living record of his 92 years. He dropped out of school in 1935. It was the Great

Depression, and his family needed the money. Later, he put himself through college while working first in a glass factory and then for the Coast Guard earning two engineering degrees, at night, at Johns Hopkins University. But that would come after the war. Middleton is now a North Carolinian by adoption — his wife wanted to move to Fayetteville to be closer to her son — and he volunteers every Tuesday and Thursday at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum.

Middleton was neither a paratrooper nor a special operations soldier but there is one exhibit in the museum that isn't either. It credits the 30th Infantry Division nicknamed "Old Hickory," one of the most storied units to serve in World War II. On D-Day-plus 3, Middleton and



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other members of the 30th landed on Omaha Beach. He drove in the pitch dark to the first bivouac area to replace a malfunctioning armament. It was just the beginning of nearly a year spent fighting in Europe, service that would earn him, among other honors, the Bronze Star and, just last year, the French Legion of Honor.

Middleton is one of the 400 "support" hands in the park, hundreds of men, women and even children. Not far from Middleton's handprint is that of 10-year-old Morgan Brooks. Morgan and her grandfather, Alan Marston, both have their hands in the park. Marston represents Rutherford County on the Wall of Oath.

Old and young, they are two of many stories.

#### The artists

The artists who cast the 500 hands heard stories from veterans that had never been told to their closest friends or family members. Fayetteville

artist Marcela Casals went into the process not knowing what to expect. "At first it was a little daunting because I had to pack all of these materials into my car and go to my destination in each of the counties, 12 counties. I had to take a deep breath and talk to these people I didn't know and explain the process of making the molds of their hands."

The process was long — three hours — and the subjects had to stay perfectly still. The stories slowly emerged.

"It was a really beautiful process," said artist Diane Hughes. "They all go back to that moment (of service) so easily in their minds."

Sometimes, the stories were serious. Others were comical. Hughes still laughs about the man who recounted a story about a rookie soldier out in the field. The men were forced to burn their excrement in order not to reveal their whereabouts to the enemy. But in one instance, the rookie

used explosives, not fuel, when it was time to burn the waste.

"Blowing up poo," Hughes said, laughing.

One of the artists, Aaron Wallace, a sculpture student at Fayetteville State University, is himself a veteran. Another artist traipsed through snow to reach her veterans in the North Carolina mountains.

Most of the veterans for the Wall of Oath were men. But there were women, too, women like Katherine Fletcher of Lincoln County.

At the end of the casting, Casals realized that she was going to miss meeting North Carolina's veterans. When the park opens July 4th, "I'm going to check my columns out and go look for my folks. It's going to be a place of meditation and renewal and joy. There aren't commemorative plaques to the dead in this park. This is for our living veterans who serve, come home and continue to be a part of this community afterward." ★

**'It was a really beautiful process. They all go back to that moment (of service) so easily in their minds.'**

*Diane Hughes, artist, on the three-hour process of making the molds for the hands.*



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