



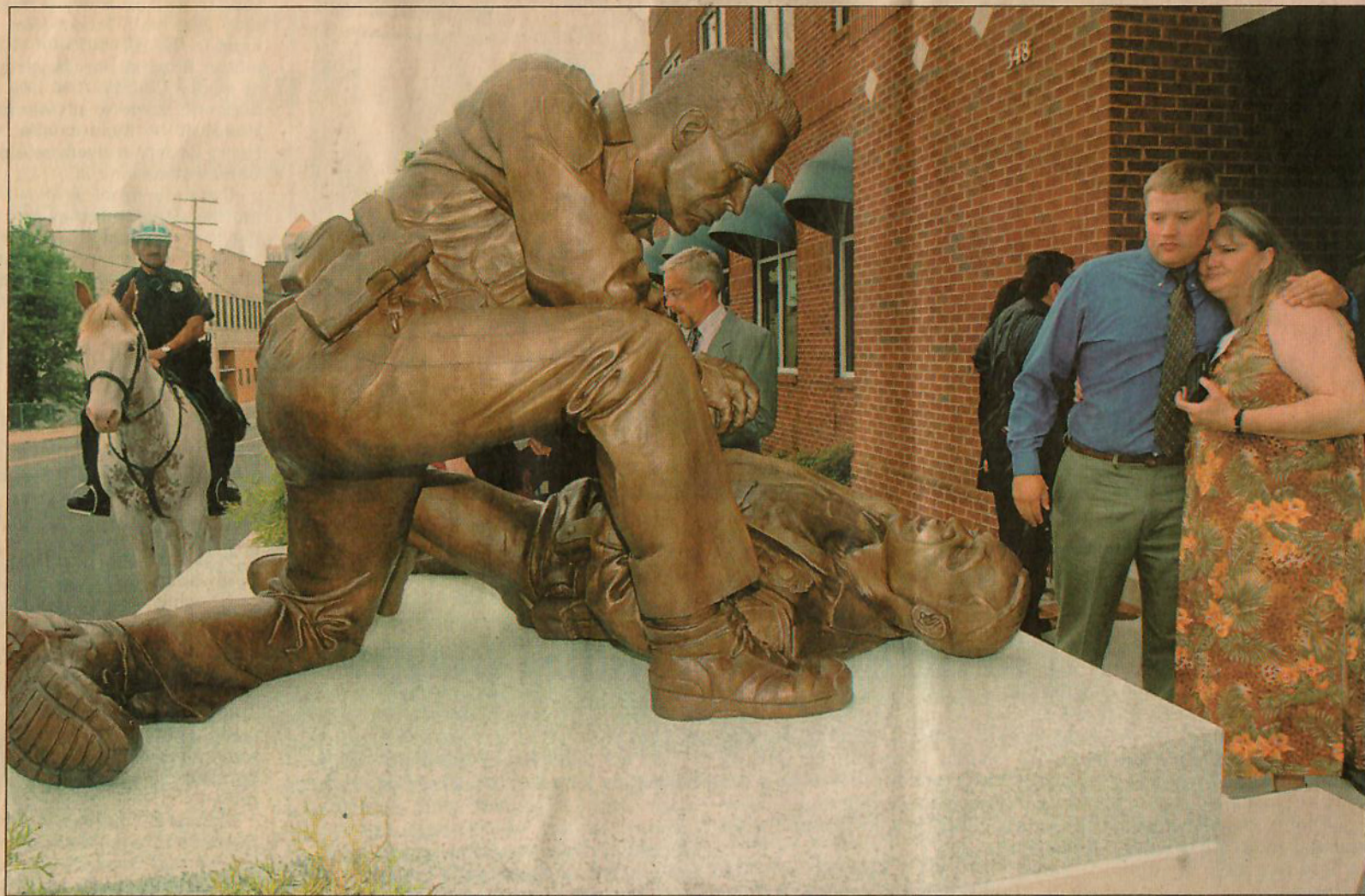
VIRGINIA

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'We want you to know that we will always remember your dads'



Photos by STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS | The Roanoke Times

Roanoke police dedicate 'Officer Down' statue

Artist Lawrence Reid Bechtel had Roanoke police officers model for the life-size sculpture.

By **Lindsey Nair**

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After the Fallen Officer Memorial sculpture was unveiled in front of the Roanoke Police Department, many people were awed by its detail Friday.

They noticed much, from the bronze shoelaces wound twice around the officers' boots, to the lines that snaked across the palms of their hands, to the way one officer's badge drooped from his uniform as he knelt over his comrade.

But outside of the details, there was an overall feeling invoked by the sculpture.

"I hope that as the officers come



Roanoke Police Academy cadets attend the dedication of the Fallen Officer Memorial. Cadet A.L. Aaron Gwin wears on his shoulder a 45-pound sandbag named "Buddy." The bag, which is rotated among the cadets a week at a time for the 27 weeks of their training, is worn as a lesson in responsibility. The message is: Never leave another officer behind.

and go from the building that they'll see the strength in this piece," said Capt. Bill Althoff. "There's strength in sacrifice."

Police officials knew they wanted a sculpture that memorialized officers killed in the line of duty even before the new police

department was built in the 300 block of Campbell Avenue. They saved a place for it between two planters out front.

The department chose a committee of employees to pursue the idea. Originally, they thought they'd find a sculpture in a catalog, but they later decided to shop around for a local artist who could create an original piece.

With help from the Roanoke Arts Commission, the department put out a call for artists' ideas in September 2001. Althoff, who was on the committee, said many artists responded and took photographs of the site.

But only one artist took multiple photographs of the site at different times of day, asked to ride along with officers and even asked to wear an officer's belt so he could feel the weight of the equipment on his own hips, Althoff said.

Blacksburg sculptor Lawrence Reid Bechtel, by day the recycling

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STATUE: Sons of most recent fallen officers attend dedication

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coordinator and solid waste manager for Virginia Tech, earned the job. The sculpture he chose to create depicts one kneeling officer grasping the hand of his mortally wounded comrade.

Bechtel had Roanoke police officers model for the sculpture in April 2003, and he said he asked some Virginia Tech police officers to pose at times, too. But in one of the first phases of the project, it was nude models he chose to work with. Those were not police officers.

He said he wanted to use nude models first so that he could see the musculature of the figures without the muffling effect of clothing. Later, he added the detail of the uniforms.

After creating first a 6-inch model, then a one-third scale model, Bechtel sculpted a life-size model out of clay and had police officials visit his studio to see it.

"There was a very quiet moment then, too, when we stepped in and saw it," said Althoff.

At the foundry, workers took rubber molds from the clay sculpture, then created a



STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS | The Roanoke Times

wax version of the sculpture from them. The wax sculpture was then coated with ceramic. When foundry workers fired that in a kiln, the wax melted away and the ceramic hardened, forming another mold.

The bronze could then be poured into the ceramic mold to create the final piece, and a finish was painted on. In the end, the sculpture was made up of about 15 parts, which were welded together.

Bechtel said the casting took longer than he thought,

and it was getting down to the wire by the time the sculpture was finished Wednesday. Police officials had planned for some time to unveil the work during Police Officer Memorial Week May 9-15.

Bechtel said Sept. 11, 2001, fell about a month after he was commissioned to do the piece, and the tragedy changed the energy he put into it.

"Almost immediately, the project took on a much larger meaning for me," he said. "I think that's what an artist

gives to a piece."

At 10 a.m. Friday morning, about 100 people (and four horses from the mounted patrol unit) filled a closed section of Campbell Avenue for the unveiling. Among them were police officers, sheriff's deputies, fire department officials, retired law enforcement officers, commonwealth's attorneys and city officials. Two workers atop a nearby building even stopped their work to observe the scene.

Roanoke Police Chief Joe

"Officer Down"

Artist: Lawrence Reid Bechtel

Material: Bronze

Scale: Life-size

Weight: 500 to 600 pounds

Hours to sculpt: About 541, including models

Parts: 15 in all, which were welded together.

Cost (with base): \$96,500



The Roanoke Times

At right, Chad Rickman (left) and Aaron Robinson (right), sons of fallen officers David Rickman and Fred Robinson, unveil the sculpture, "Officer Down" by artist Lawrence Reid Bechtel during a memorial dedication ceremony Friday.

Gaskins attended the service in his dress uniform. He said he lost his best friend in the line of duty when he was employed by the Newport News Police Department in 1981.

Seeing the sculpture, he said, "all the thoughts and emotions come flooding back as to why it's really there."

Two "special guests" invited to unveil the memorial were the sons of Roanoke's most recent fallen officers, David Rickman and Fred Robinson. Chad Rickman, 23,

lost his father when he was shot by a woman during a domestic dispute call in 1986. Aaron Robinson, 22, lost his father in an on-duty car crash in 1992.

"Many of us still have the images of little guys out at a cemetery," Althoff told the boys in a trembling voice.

"We want you to know, fellas, that it makes us feel so good to see you here so well and strong," he said. "We want you to know that we will always remember your dads."