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## Sculptor helps ComEd honor coworkers with bronze sculpture

Out of the 50 or so public bronze sculptures that Erik Blome has made, his latest hits closest to home.

His newest work, four months in the making, will stand near the entrance to ComEd's Crystal Lake reporting center, 5100 S. Route 31. The half-scale bronze depicts two linemen climbing a 9-foot-tall telephone pole with symbols of Crystal Lake on the base – including Raue Center for the Arts, Palmer House, The Freeze, the McCormick Park water tower, Dole Mansion, the post office and First Congregational Church.

Mark Schleeauf, a lineman in ComEd's Crystal Lake office and steward for the Illinois Brotherhood of Electrical Workers' Local 15, said the statue memorializes two linemen who died on the job. Tim Miller, 40, of Woodstock died June 2000 while doing rear lot-line improvements in Lakewood. Kelly Skiles, 53, of Lyons, Wis., died March 2011 from a head injury suffered while a ComEd crew was replacing poles at the intersection of Crystal Lake Avenue and East Street.

The statue tentatively is slated for dedication March 29 – the one-year anniversary of Skiles' death.

"I think the intent of the company is when someone loses their life working for the company, there be some type of memorial," Schleeauf said. "With Kelly's passing, we didn't want a headstone type of thing put up, and a plaque didn't make sense to me or other individuals. I suggested some type of sculpture."

Schleeauf knew of Blome, who received publicity for creating the Blackhawks' statue in front of the United Center, and he knew he was a local guy.

"It felt like a good fit, him being from Crystal Lake," he said. "He understood the meaning and severity of what happened."

A few meetings later, they settled on a design – first sketched out on paper and then painstakingly crafted bit by bit starting Sept. 11.

"There is no likeness of them in the people on the pole – Kelly or Tim. We didn't want to do that," Schleeauf said. "When Kelly died we planted a tree and put a boulder with a brass plaque on it. But unless you know what it is, you don't know what it is. ... This [sculpture] is more of a dedication to these guys. But we also wanted to touch a little bit as a reminder that our job is dangerous."

Blome, 44, from Deerfield, attended the University of Michigan where he earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts with a concentration on figurative sculpture. He later received a master's of fine arts degree in sculpture from Boston University and studied abroad with the help of a Rotary scholarship. He earned a post-graduate diploma in sculpture and drawing from Royal College of Art in London, England.

The son of an artist, Blome said he nearly became a technical writer after enjoying mixed success in his 20s while working out of a rat-infested studio in Rogers Park. Back then he was doing odd jobs to survive, including teaching and bartending.

"I had a lot of ambition but not a lot of money," Blome said with a laugh.

That is when he began applying for public art commissions. He moved into his studio into a former auto mechanics lab at Deerfield High School, and he was selected to sculpt a 10-foot-tall sculpture of Martin Luther King in Milwaukee, Wis. Other commissions soon followed.

"I don't want to say 'Don't give up,' because if you feel you're getting nowhere you probably should," Blome said. "But if you feel strongly about something, if that is what drives you and it's what you want to do, your first consideration should not be money. It may take a while to make your dreams happen."

Blome's résumé includes large-scale commissioned sculptures throughout the country, including the likeness of Duke Ellington for Northern Illinois University, the Blackhawks' 75th anniversary commemorative sculpture, native son Jack Benny for the city of Waukegan and a 911 monument using large steel beams from the World Trade Center for the city of Oak Lawn. He also completed a 20-foot-tall steel sculpture project in 2009 in southern Ethiopia, where he was an artist-in-residence and where he built a bronze foundry.

Blome hopes to eventually build a foundry in Crystal Lake, as well.

Blome is returning this month to the Middle East as a Fulbright Scholar. He will teach at Helwan University in Cairo for the

next 4 1/2 months. He hopes to create a lasting legacy there. After all, the opportunity to pass on this unique art form and its permanence are reasons he embraced sculpting at age 18 rather than focusing all of this attention on painting.

"I think sculpture for public places is great. It endures. It is a permanent thing," Blome said. "Big public sculptures are interesting, dramatic and cool."

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