



Joshua Lott for The New York Times

Near to Religious Display, the Bill of Rights

By FERNANDA SANTOS 9:43 AM ET

After the controversy over Alabama's monument to the Ten Commandments, the comedian Chris Bliss searched for Bill of Rights memorials, only to find there were none.



Joshua Lott for The New York Times

PHOENIX — It started as a joke about 10 years ago. Chris Bliss, a juggler and stand-up comedian of [Internet fame](#), had been scanning the headlines for inspiration and discovered the controversy over a granite monument to the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of Alabama's state judicial building.

"Instead of arguing over whether to leave up or take down these displays of the Ten Commandments," he said in a comedy routine, "my suggestion is to put up displays of the Bill of Rights next to them and let people comparison shop."

Funny or not, the idea intrigued him, so Mr. Bliss set out to search for Bill of Rights monuments, only to find there were none. He decided to try to build one, and to do it in Arizona, "a place that's known as contentious, a backwater, even," he said. As he spoke last week, [the monument](#) was beginning to take shape on a knoll overlooking the State Capitol, in a plaza full of other monuments and memorials honoring women, veterans and, yes, the Ten Commandments.

Before it could happen, though, Mr. Bliss, who left Phoenix for Austin, Tex., three years ago, had to figure out a way to get the Legislature to approve the monument on a slice of public land. In 2005, he was a guest on a radio show hosted by Kyrsten Sinema, then a freshman state representative, and asked if she would sponsor a bill.

"I'm a Democrat, and this is Arizona," Ms. Sinema recalled telling him. "You need a Republican to push this legislation

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Joshua Lott for The New York Times

Students visiting the Arizona Capitol in Phoenix.

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Joshua Lott for The New York Times

Chris Bliss, who persuaded the Legislature to approve the installation on a slice of public land.

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Joshua Lott for The New York Times

The Fourth Amendment inscribed on a slab. Joseph Kincannon, the lead sculptor, wanted the pieces to be "inviting to the eye."

for you." (Republicans have been the majority in the Legislature for at least 40 years.)

"I don't like 'nos' for answers," Mr. Bliss said.

Ms. Sinema, who was elected to Congress last month, devised a strategy. For the legislation to be approved, she said in an interview, it would need the support of a staunch Republican, preferably in the Senate, where many bills sponsored by Democrats implode. She zeroed in on Karen S. Johnson, whom she described as "[Tea Party](#) before there

was a Tea Party." (Ms. Johnson, who left the Legislature in 2008, prefers the "conservative" label.)

"Hey, for heaven's sake, how could anybody not be supportive of this?" said Ms. Johnson, who is perhaps better known for sponsoring a bill that would have allowed people with concealed-weapon permits to carry guns at public colleges and universities.

She had no qualms about putting her name next to Ms. Sinema's, who at 28 was the Legislature's youngest member — as well as an openly bisexual lawmaker whom "a lot of people liked to pick on," as Ms. Sinema put it.

The bill stipulated that the project had to be paid through private donations. On Mother's Day, Mr. Bliss raised more than \$100,000 through a benefit concert here, out of \$375,000 he has raised so far. (He said there is still about \$10,000 to go.)

The concert brought together some big names in both comedy and civil rights. One of them, Dick Gregory, 80, had marched alongside the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and staged hunger strikes in the name of racial equality. Another, Tom Smothers, 75, was a star of "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," a top-rated show on CBS from 1967 to 1969 before it was canceled over the provocative tone of its political commentary, particularly on the Vietnam War.

The bill passed unanimously in the Arizona House and Senate in 2006, which was unusual for a legislative body that remains politically divided. It was an encouraging moment for Mr. Bliss, who said it “confirmed it was a mission worth committing to.” Since then, he has gotten a commemorative Bill of Rights display unveiled outside the Poweshiek County Courthouse in Montezuma, Iowa, and another has been approved in Everett, Wash. Mr. Bliss has also begun raising money for a monument outside the Texas Supreme Court building in Austin.

The lead sculptor for the monument here, [Joseph Kincannon](#), has carved 10 slabs of limestone, one for each amendment. They are planted outside the Capitol and [will be dedicated](#) on Saturday. Each slab is undulating and unique — the First Amendment resembles the tip of a key; the Second Amendment, a pregnant woman’s profile.

Mr. Kincannon trained at the stoneyard at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in Manhattan. He worked there for 27 years, carving and building its ornate south tower. He said he wanted the monument’s pieces “to have movement when they were next to each other” so they would become “inviting to the eye.”

The blocks of limestone came from a quarry near Austin, where they were milled and carved over the summer. The heaviest, at about 7,000 pounds, carries the imprint of the Fifth Amendment, which protects against abuse of government authority in a legal procedure. The lightest, at 2,500 pounds, offers the Third Amendment, which prohibits quartering soldiers in private homes without the homeowner’s consent.

Mr. Kincannon has read the material over and over, and from many angles. To him, the project was never about the significance behind the words, but about making them “comfortable to read,” he said.

For Mr. Bliss, however, it is all about the words’ meaning. He envisions the monument as a place for learning and reflection, “our bedrock principles broken up in 10 digestible bites,” he said.

Display lauds Bill of Rights

1st monument of its kind in U.S.



Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton and Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer help unveil two of the 10 markers that make up the Bill of Rights monument in Wesley Bolin Memorial Plaza. The monument, in an arch around an amphitheater, was dedicated on Saturday. CHERYL EVANS/THE REPUBLIC

By Kaila White

The Republic | azcentral.com

State political leaders and hundreds of other Arizonans gathered Saturday to dedicate the nation's first Bill of Rights monument in Wesley Bolin Memorial Plaza across from the Arizona state Capitol on Saturday.

As a light drizzle soaked the plaza, speakers including Gov. Jan Brewer, Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton and U.S. Rep.-elect Kyrsten Sinema used the occasion and the backdrop of National Bill of Rights Day to reflect on the power and enduring legacy of America's celebrated list of codified, in-

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Bill of Rights

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alienable rights.

"This is exactly what the Bill of Rights is meant to do in this country: bring together Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, Greens, those from any political party or none whatsoever," said Sinema, who as a Democratic state representative co-sponsored the bill to establish the monument in 2005.

The ceremony came a day after a gunman killed 26 people, including 20 young children, at a Newtown, Conn., elementary school, reigniting national debate over gun-control laws and the Second Amendment.

The tragedy added a somber tone to the proceedings, but for the most part, Arizona leaders refrained from using the dedication to weigh in on the controversy.

Stanton said "in hindsight, we see there were flaws in the original text (of the Constitution)," and he mentioned its improvements in the years since, such as suffrage and the abolition of slavery. "Now, more than ever, it is a time for our country to have a debate on the parameters of the Second Amendment," he added.

Consisting of ten 10-foot-tall limestone monoliths, each engraved with an amendment, the monument sits in an arch around a grassy amphitheater near the Vietnam veterans memorial. It is feet away from a stone tablet of the Ten Commandments, the text that inspired stand-up comedian and juggler Chris Bliss to spearhead a movement to erect a monument to the amendments.

In 2004, when Bliss was based in Phoenix, a national debate had erupted over whether to keep a public monument to the Ten Commandments that had gone up in Alabama.

In his comedy act, Bliss joked that rather than remove the

monument, officials should display the Bill of Rights next to it so that people could "comparison shop."

As the joke morphed into a cause, Bliss pitched the idea to Sinema in 2005 during a radio-show interview in Phoenix, and she immediately took to it. Sinema reached out to former state legislator Karen Johnson to co-sponsor a bill, and together, they pushed the idea into reality.

"They got the unanimous, nonpartisan support of the Arizona Legislature," Bliss said during the dedication, garnering claps and laughs. "I don't think this Legislature has ever seen either of those."

After getting an official location for the memorial in the plaza in 2010, Bliss organized an executive committee, contracted with a stone sculptor in Texas and set out to raise \$400,000. In May, he hosted a comedy-show fundraiser at Symphony Hall in Phoenix, raising more than \$110,000.

Money also came from local businesses and organizations including the Newman's Own Foundation, the Arizona Cardinals and the Arizona Diamondbacks.

The goal was to be ready by Dec. 15, the day that the amendments were adopted in 1791 and that President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared a national holiday in 1941.

Brewer expressed pride that Arizona had the first monument of its kind.

As the final speaker, Bliss talked about the bill's role as a blueprint for the future.

"The very phrase 'Bill of Rights' has now become synonymous with the demands of people the world over seeking freedom from oppression. It has become a global template for human rights and dignity," he said.

Ten Arizona figures, ranging from high-school history teacher Katie Parod Hansen to Brewer herself, pulled a cloth veil off each monolith as its amendment was read aloud.

Bill of Rights monument to be dedicated

By Michael Kiefer | The Republic | azcentral.com

Today is National Bill of Rights Day, the perfect day to dedicate the nation's first monument to the Bill of Rights, which has been erected right across 17th Avenue from the Arizona Capitol in Wesley Bolin Memorial Plaza.

It's a stunning tableau: ten 10-foot-tall limestone monoliths along a curved walkway beneath paloverde trees. Each is carved with large block letters that look like they could have been carried on stone tablets by Moses himself — or Alexander Hamilton.

There are fewer than 500 words on the tab-

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Monument

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lets, but they set out the basics of American law:

1. Free speech.
2. The right to bear arms.
3. Freedom from having soldiers take over your house.
4. Freedom from unreasonable search and seizure.
5. The right to due process of law.
6. The right to confront your accusers in an impartial court of law.
7. The right to sue and be sued.
8. Freedom from cruel and unusual punishment.
9. A recognition that other rights exist.
10. The right for states to make laws where the federal government has not.

"Every single thing in this Bill of Rights was written out of a real-life experience," said Chris Bliss, who spearheaded the project. "This was not some academic exercise."

Event begins at 10 a.m.

The ceremony to dedicate the monument starts at 10 a.m. today. Newly elected U.S. Rep. Kyrsten Sinema will speak, as will Gov. Jan Brewer, Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton and Bliss, a Bill of Rights-obsessed comedian who conceived the project out of an offhand joke about the Ten Commandments.

In 2004, when he came up with the idea, Bliss was based in Phoenix but working the comedy circuit around the country. He was newly famous for a viral video in which he juggled four balls perfectly in sync with the Beatles song "Golden Slumbers" from the "Abbey Road" album.

Most intelligent comedy is topical, and at that moment, there was a national uproar over a public monument to the Ten Commandments in Alabama. Pundits argued over whether the Old Testament code was the basis of American law or a violation of the separation of church and state.

Bliss thought, "Wow, this country's got a bad marriage."

But the question went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and sparked argument all over the country as politicians proposed similar monuments for their own states, or defended monuments that already exist-



The Bill of Rights Monument, conceived by Chris Bliss, opens today at Wesley Bolin Memorial Plaza in Phoenix. MICHAEL SCHENNUM/THE REPUBLIC

ed. Arizona has had its own Ten Commandments plaque in Wesley Bolin Plaza since 1964.

As a comedian, Bliss took a smart-alecky view of the tiff that he worked into his act.

"Instead of arguing over whether to leave up or to take down these displays of the Ten Commandments, my suggestion is to put up displays of the Bill of Rights next to them, and let people comparison shop," he would say, "because the Bill of Rights gives you a really good deal. It tells you to speak freely, carry a weapon, pursue happiness ... and then, it presumes that I'm innocent!"

The punch line: "My religion won't give me anything close to that deal."

But as he thought about it, the joke became less funny and more ironic. "In a fit of idleness," he said, he Googled "Bill of Rights monuments" and found there were none anywhere in the country.

He planted the notion in the ears of friends, talk-radio hosts, people he thought could get it started. They were not interested. And as he researched monuments in general, he was told, "We don't build monuments to ideas, we build them to people and events."

He took it on as a personal challenge, and it was the biggest juggling act of his career.

Sinema lends support

In 2005, Bliss met then-state Rep. Sinema during a radio-show interview in Phoenix, and he pitched the idea to her.

"My first thought was that it made perfect sense," Sinema said. "Of all the monuments to

put near a state Capitol would be one about the Bill of Rights, so I was surprised to learn that there were none.

"My second thought was: We need to do it.

"My third thought was: Why are you asking me? I'm a Democrat."

Sinema knew she would need help from across the aisle to push the project through the Legislature, so she enlisted Republican state Rep. Karen Johnson to co-sponsor. It passed: What politician, after all, can say no to the Constitution?

"There's intensity in Arizona around different amendments for different communities," Sinema said, "but there's enough room for all of us. What I love about this project is that it does what Chris Bliss wanted it to do, which is to bring people together."

But getting through the ensuing red tape and paying for the construction were other matters. Bliss moved to Austin but remained committed to the idea.

Finally, in fall 2010, the commission in charge of state monuments offered Bliss some prime real estate in Bolin Plaza on a hillside approaching the Vietnam veterans memorial on the south side of the plaza near Jefferson Street.

"How could I contain myself?" Bliss said. "You don't want to do the happy dance right away."

He contracted with a stone sculptor in Texas, worked up a design, and assembled an executive committee that included Doug Pruitt, then head of Sundt Construction; attorneys David Bodney, Joe Kanefield and

Grant Woods; show impresario Danny Zelisko; and farmer William Perry. The first contribution, Bliss said, was a \$10 check from a disabled vet, a modest start.

In May of this year, he staged a comedy-show fundraiser at Symphony Hall that included Lewis Black, Don "Father Guido Sarducci" Novello, Steven Wright, Bobcat Goldthwait, and even old leftie icons Tom Smothers and Dick Gregory. (He tried to get neocon comic Dennis Miller, but to no avail.) They raised more than \$110,000.

Bigger contributions followed. Bliss got money from Newman's Own Foundation, the Arizona Cardinals and Diamondbacks, and others. As of Thursday, Bliss was within \$5,000 of the \$400,000 cost of the monument.

That day, he was nervously fussing over the final touches, overseeing explanatory plaques being mounted on the sides of the monument, adjusting the lights that illuminate it at night.

He stood on the round stage behind the monoliths where the dedication will take place today. His head spun around in time to see a young man riding down a sloped sidewalk on the handlebars of a wheelchair. An elderly woman, presumably a grandmother, sat in the chair as it rolled into a circular plaza, and both laughed wickedly at the untoward mischief.

"Wow, I wish I had video of that!" Bliss said.

Then he looked toward the back of the monument, and more importantly, at the people strolling by who couldn't help but stop to read the words that had been literally and figuratively carved in stone.

Across the street were the offices and assembly rooms of a Legislature and an administration that are fond of the second and tenth items on the list (see above), while their policies and statutes of late have been challenged in state and federal courts on the fourth, fifth and eighth.

But Bliss knew when he pitched the idea, no one would be able to refute the overall importance of the list itself and how it shapes the laws of the land.

"I'm not a lawyer, and I didn't particularly get along with my father, who was one," Bliss said, "but the rule of law is the basis of a free society."

Bill of Rights gets tribute it deserves

Today marks the 221st anniversary of the ratification of the Bill of Rights. It also marks the 71st anniversary of Dec. 15 being designated by President Franklin Roosevelt as Bill of Rights Day.

It's hard to imagine a more forgotten commemoration of anything so centrally important to our identity as a nation. The Bill of Rights is the single most powerful and successful assertion of individual rights and liberties ever written.

In less than 500 words, it supplanted the divine right of kings with the unalienable rights of the individual, laid out due process, probable cause, and the presumption of innocence, established the right to bear arms, gave protection against self-incrimination, and prohibited both torture and confiscatory fines. All integrated into an architecture of checks and balances designed to prevent excessive concentrations of power in the hands of the few, and the tyranny of the majority.

That's the entire legal and philosophical framework for building the institutions of a free, just and civil society. Add to that the critical role the Bill of Rights played in sealing the deal on the new Constitution, essentially keeping the United States from disuniting, and the role it has played ever since in laying out the preconditions for human rights and dignity across the rest of the world, and it becomes clear that the Bill of Rights is one of history's most important and influential documents.

Yet when it comes to media coverage, the odds are far better that this Dec. 15 you'll hear about how it's National Cupcake Day rather than the 221st anniversary of the Bill of Rights.

Not that I have anything against cupcakes, but one of these things is not like the other. You'd think that just one day a year we could find a sugar-free



MY TURN

CHRIS BLISS

excuse to celebrate the enduring genius of our Bill of Rights instead.

What's it take to get people's attention? Do we need to build a

monument?

Yes, and that's exactly what we've done.

Today America's first monument to the Bill of Rights will be dedicated at Wesley Bolin Plaza in Phoenix, across the street from the Arizona Capitol.

Designed and sculpted by Joseph Kincannon, one of the country's leading stone artisans, this is a major new monument that promises to become a historic landmark for Arizona and the nation. It will be the first monument to the Bill of Rights in the United States.

The monument is also fresh proof of what can happen when we put aside partisan differences to celebrate our common ground. Our initial sponsors, Kyrsten Sinema (soon to be a member of Congress) and Karen Johnson, are polar opposites politically. This project would not have happened without them teaming up, much like the Bill of Rights would not have happened without the federalist and the anti-federalists setting aside their differences to reach consensus.

That approach worked in 1791, with no less than the future of the union at stake, setting the stage for the most successful nation in history. Considering the lack of courage that passes for conviction in our current politics of paralysis, it's a lesson we'd do well to remember today.

Chris Bliss, a stand-up comedian and speaker, is founder and executive director of MyBillofRights.org, the Bill of Rights Monument Project.

Arizona's monument to compromise

After all the nasty things politicians (and their supporters) said to one another before the election and all the nasty things that have been said after the election, what if I told you there were 10 things everyone in America absolutely agrees upon?

First, you'd say I am delusional.

True.

But that has nothing to do with this discussion.

Second, you'd say that if there actually are 10 things



about which we all agree, we should build a monument to them.

Well, there are. And, actually, we are.

A little over a week ago, ground was broken at the Arizona Capitol for a monument to the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S.

Constitution.

The project was initiated by comedian/activist Chris Bliss, with whom I first spoke more than six years ago when he was trying to get a bill approving the monument through the Arizona Legislature.

Back then he told me:

"Those 10 amendments to the Constitution are like our marriage vows. If we could put a monument to them in each state capitol, we could have a powerful daily reminder of

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what should be guiding us forward."

We could use such a thing just about now.

Bliss put together a grassroots organization to raise private money for the monuments. Its website is MyBillOfRights.org, where you can see what the monument looks like and, if you wish, contribute.

Bliss chose Arizona as the first state for a monument. The Amendment Monoliths, as they're called, were carved at Kincannon Studios in Austin. Bliss and his group have been raising money for the monument and all the necessary work that goes along with making such an idea a reality.

He's hoping for an Arizona dedication on Dec. 15, Bill of Rights Day.

"It has been a very long haul, but very much worth it," he told me. "The election process is like a national psychosis. It is so nasty, so negative. I sent out a tweet before Election Day saying I can't wait until the

election is over so I can go back to hating people I actually know. The truth is, you can't help but wonder after months and months of personal attacks if we can get back to having a normal conversation about anything."

It'll take finding some things we agree upon. Like those amendments protecting speech and religion and gun rights and privacy and so on.

We argue constantly about how lawmakers and judges interpret the amendments, but none of us would say the amendments shouldn't exist.

"One of the things you learn just from reading these amendments and learning just a little about the men who put them together is that this was the result of compromise," Bliss said.

"Individuals among the Founding Fathers differed about how the amendments should be written and what should be included, and I'd guess that things got a little nasty, but they worked it out. They compromised."

In that sense, the 10 monoliths being installed at the state Capitol not only represent a

monument to the country's core principles but a monument to compromise itself.

Republicans and Democrats have helped fund the project. And Bliss points out that his group will be dedicating a monument that does not credit a single contributor on site. The plaque will read "From the People, to the Generations that Follow/Celebrating the Enduring Genius of Our Bill of Rights."

"It's been a crazy journey, but I've met some amazing, generous people," Bliss told me. "You go through an election season in the United States and you feel like you have to remind people that Machiavelli and Orwell weren't trying to write playbooks. They were writing cautionary tales. Something like this monument is a solid, enduring reminder of our best collaborative work. We can build on that."

We already have.

In the course of this simple newspaper column, for example, we have increased the number of things we all agree upon to 11: the 10 amendments to the Constitution and the fact that I'm delusional.



BY TIM EIGO

Rock of Ages



Chris Bliss doesn't have anything personal against cupcakes. But he can get pretty riled up about a national day dedicated to the paper-wrapped confections.

On a recent December 15, Bliss eagerly awaited the morning news, hoping to see some coverage of a day that should be central to our nation's history—Bill of Rights Day, which honors an American founding document.

To his eternal chagrin, the coverage went a more sugary path. Morning anchor after morning anchor smirked at the fact that the date recognized National Cupcake Day. Frosting and sprinkles got their coverage, while Americans' essential rights went unmentioned.

That is something Bliss would like to change. And as the executive director of MyBillofRights.org, he is starting that national movement right here in Arizona.

If Bliss is successful, in Arizona's Centennial year, the state will be the first to install a monument to one of our nation's most cherished documents. And a fundraiser on its behalf will allow the Grand Canyon State to laugh along the way.

Founding Document

Most Americans know that the Bill of Rights is comprised of the first 10 amendments to the United States Constitution. Those amendments delineate some of the most valued rights, such as speech, religion, arms and freedom from unreasonable searches or excessive bail.

What many people forget—and what Bliss hopes to convey—is that the Bill of Rights was not simply an afterthought, a series of technical corrections that the Founders had missed.

Instead, the first 10 amendments were negotiated and discussed by the Founders as they drafted the Constitution. They were demanded by many, even as others preferred not to have them in the Constitution itself. But without the promise of a Bill of Rights, the Constitution's advocates never would have marshaled the votes for passage.

It was ratified on December 15, 1791, when Virginia became the 11th state to approve the amendments.

Bliss gets pretty fiery when talking about those amendments:

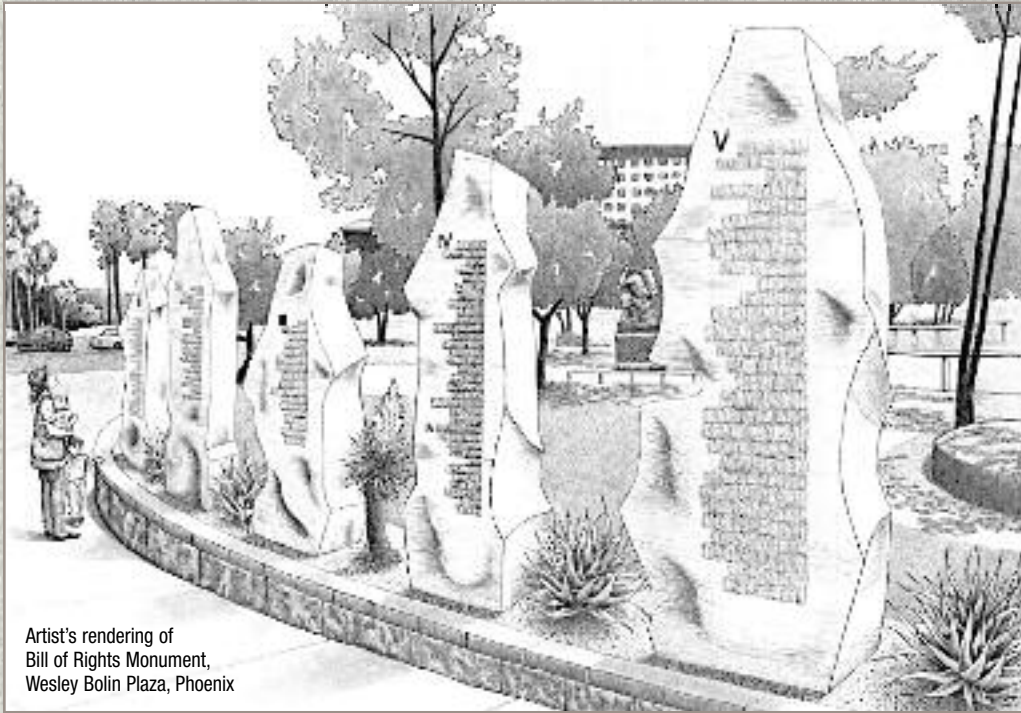
Adding a Bill of Rights was the last major element to emerge from the debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists when the new Constitution was proposed in 1787. Its inclusion proved essential in winning enough support from both sides to guarantee that the Constitution itself would be ratified.

Bliss reminds listeners that the Bill of Rights completed the framework started by the 1776 Declaration of Independence. Their combined ratification “formalized the new government, securing once and for all the nationhood of the United States.”

Monument's Bedfellows

It is those historic amendments that Bliss wants to commemorate in every state capitol in the country. A comedian by trade, he takes seriously all the elements required to get 10 monoliths erected in Phoenix. (Correspondents who mistakenly call the limestone blocks a “memorial” are gently reminded by Bliss that it will be a “monu-

Bill of Rights Monument to Be Nation's First



Artist's rendering of
Bill of Rights Monument,
Wesley Bolin Plaza, Phoenix

the political divide; they included judges, lawyers, State Bar of Arizona President Joe Kanefield and former Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon. And as the advocates chatted about the concert, others who were attending a separate event at the restaurant began to stop by. They were taking part in their own celebration on the patio for a newly appointed Arizona Regent—who had been confirmed through a process marked by political contention. Viewing the Bill of Rights poster, however, many in the Regent's party sidled over to discuss the topic and offer their support.

Attendees thought: Bliss and his committee may just be on to something. The state ultimately agreed, when the Arizona Historical Advisory Commission designated the effort a Centennial Legacy Project in February.

ment," because "The Bill of Rights are not dead.")

In the endeavor, he has had countless meetings with legislators, lawyers, contractors and other stakeholders. All have embraced the project—at first tentatively and then enthusiastically. Some have been moved by Bliss's notion that the Bill of Rights needs to be remembered and taught to coming generations. Others have been pleased at the prospect that no public monies will go toward the venture. And all are intrigued at the possibility of celebrating a document that safeguards many liberties; advocates who seek to safeguard free speech, or freedom from government searches, or the right to bear arms—all may align with a Bill of Rights project.

Bliss says, "These kinds of legacy projects are extremely rare. Your kids will take their kids to see the monument." And among all the states that will have such a landmark, Bliss adds, "There's only one first state."

The project's diverse support goes back

to the beginning of the effort, Bliss says, when he was buttonholing Arizona legislators about it. What he sought was bipartisan approval for siting it prominently near the Capitol. Ultimately, then-Rep. Kyrsten Sinema and current Sen. Karen Johnson came together to champion the idea to their fellow lawmakers. Ultimately, all the legislators concurred in the idea—a rare event in any state capitol. It was approved for a prime spot on Wesley Bolin Plaza.

Today, that partnership continues to be a hallmark of the endeavor. In fact, it is a central part of Bliss's organization in every state in which they work.

In late February, Bliss invited the executive fundraising committee, led by Doug Pruitt of Sundt Construction, and other select guests to a special event at Tom's Tavern in downtown Phoenix. There, he and concert promoter Danny Zelisko announced the lineup for a comedy fundraiser to benefit the monument.

Attendees and the committee bridged

Comedy Festival

Getting the limestone monuments planted in the ground is a pretty economical affair, organizers say. From conception to dedication, the project will require \$400,000.

Helping them on that path is the Newman's Own Foundation, the late actor Paul Newman's charitable organization. In 2011, it provided \$50,000 to get the nationwide project up and running. In what Bliss says is a very positive sign, the organization encouraged the Bill of Rights project to apply again in 2012 for \$45,000 to help it toward completion. But they still need donations from individuals, corporations and law firms. (MyBillofRights.org is a non-profit 501(c)(3) and an all-volunteer organization, Bliss says; he is not paid a salary.)

"I mean: \$400,000!" exclaims Bliss. "For something that's going to last over 100 years, made by one of the world's top stone artists. It's unbelievably inexpensive."

For context, Bliss says the amount is 20



Rock of Ages: Bill of Rights Monument



Comedy Festival press conference, Phoenix Symphony Hall, March 9, 2012.
L to R: Chris Bliss, Danny Zelisko, David Bodney, Grant Woods.



Monument supporters: Sen. Karen Johnson and then-Rep. Kyrsten Sinema with Chris Bliss.

percent less than another Arizona project—creating and sending a statue of Barry Goldwater to the U.S. Capitol. And he repeats—to everyone he meets—that this project will spend no taxpayer money.

On May 13, though, he hopes taxpayers and others will jam Phoenix Symphony Hall's 2,300 seats. There, a noteworthy lineup of comedians will perform in an effort to raise the funds. He worked with event expert Danny Zelisko to develop the comedy evening.

Comedians slated to appear will be Lewis Black, Bill Engvall, Bobcat Goldthwait, Dick Gregory, Kathleen Madigan, Tommy Smothers and Steven Wright. Musical guests from the band Little Feat will be Paul Barrere and Fred Tackett. According to organizers, the performers are all volunteering their talents; all receipts will go to the monument costs.

Bliss says that individual ticket prices are reasonable (between \$53 and \$98, available at <http://tinyurl.com/ce5ewtw>) and well worth the comedy talent that will be on display. But he and Zelisko urge those interested in a "Hall of Fame comedy experience" to consider purchasing special VIP seating, called the Founders Circle and Presidents Circle. (More detail on the concert is at <http://mybillofrights.org/concert/>)

Rolling the Stones

The monument may take a comedy concert to get installed, but their ingredients have taken a millennium to coalesce. The result of literally geologic time, the 10 limestone plinths were excavated from a Texas quarry.

(For those who will inevitably wonder, Bliss admits that there is limestone in Arizona. However, he says that it is often dynamited out, resulting in too-small blocks. Instead, what they got from Texas were 10 single-saw-cut blocks that were 8 to 10 feet long.)

In February, that stone—10 blocks weighing 44,000 pounds—was delivered to a sculptor's studio in Austin. Each block will be individually sculpted, resulting in a set of 10 distinct shapes, each featuring the full text of one amendment sandblasted deeply into the surface facing the viewer.

The studio belongs to Joseph Kincannon, who previously had spent 15 years at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York and had served as its lead carver. As one of the nation's leading stone artisans, Kincannon is a remarkable addition to this project, Bliss says.

That addition demonstrates some of the good luck this project has seen.

Back in 2006, Bliss was looking for a carver who could develop an idea for a monument. But Googling "stone mason" yielded very little.

"I was calling people that made mausoleums for a living," says Bliss. "And you know what their question was? 'How many letters is it, cuz we charge by the letter.'"

That was not the approach of Kincannon Studios. When Bliss contacted them, he knew he was onto something.

Hearing Bliss's vision, Joseph Kincannon replied, "My wife and I have been sitting in

What Lawyers Can Do

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Danny Zelisko announces comedy lineup, Feb. 29, 2012.



Rock of Ages: Bill of Rights Monument



our studio for the last six weeks, saying we need to put up something about freedom at the Texas State Capitol.”

“I got chills,” says Bliss. “I couldn’t believe I found these guys.”

Every state’s monument will be unique and site-specific, Bliss says. Like Arizona’s monument, Texas’s is fully approved. However, because it will be a Texas-sized revisioning of the entire plaza in front of the state Supreme Court—which comes with a \$4 million price tag—Arizona’s is slated to be dedicated first.

Once installed, Arizona’s version will have no on-site recognition of donors (though they will be thanked online). As Bliss says, “The Bill of Rights is America’s logo; we’re not going to logo it.”

He seeks donations from individuals and business entities. In an intriguing effort, those who donate may designate their contributions to go toward the monolith of their choice, depending on which amendment is their favorite.

Lawyers, Others Stand Up

Arizona’s legal community has joined the monument effort.

David Bodney serves on the Executive Fundraising Committee, and he didn’t hesitate when Bliss asked him to participate.

“The Bill of Rights Monument is an important initiative,” says the Steptoe & Johnson partner. “It promotes public awareness of the steps our founders took to protect the rights of man. Those steps are not merely historic, but living imprints of the liberties we cherish, but must labor to preserve.”

At a Symphony Hall press conference in March, lawyer and committee member Grant Woods echoed that notion.

“We should be doing positive things in this state, and we should be leading the nation. This would be a great way to end our Centennial year.”

Bodney views the project as something

that may unite diverse viewpoints.

“Whether we be Democrats or Republicans, Independents or otherwise, the Bill of Rights Monument serves as a reminder of our country’s historic struggle against tyranny—and the triumph of human rights.”

Committee chair Doug Pruitt also is chair of Sundt Construction, which will construct the monument site and install the stone. He says Arizona should be proud to be first in this effort.

“I was surprised that the Bill of Rights had not been memorialized elsewhere. When you think of the importance of this document on the history of this country, it’s difficult to believe that it hasn’t or doesn’t receive greater recognition.”

He continues, “I think it would be great for Arizona to be the first state to create such

manner.”

He also cites unity as a probable outcome.

“It’s nice knowing that despite our differences, there are some issues that will always bring us together. Protecting, preserving and defending our Constitution and the Bill of Rights is one of them.”

Kanefield and others all point to funding as the biggest challenge. But “I’m confident it will all come together, and we’ll have the funding needed to build this spectacular monument.”

Juggling Many Tasks

Chris Bliss is in a whirlwind of activity leading up to the May 13 comedy concert. But that’s a spotlight he’s familiar with.


A comedian himself, he may be most famous for a jaw-dropping display of juggling talent that has wowed audiences—and become a Youtube sensation.

“On paper it looks kind of very strange,” Bliss chuckles. “You know: juggler, comedian, monument builder. But I’m the son of a lawyer who grew up in Washington DC, the city of monuments. And as a kid, nothing except natural wonders has the kind of grab on the human imagination that monumental architecture does.”

The humor of the situation is not lost on the comedian.

“If my dad was still around, he’d probably be laughing, because I quit college to avoid becoming a lawyer. I was on a straight path into his law firm, and I thought, ‘How do I blow this up?’ So I quit college to juggle at rock concerts.”

“Now, I’m spending all my time building monuments to one of the great legal documents in human history.”

With the help of Arizona’s lawyers, Bliss hopes to knock National Cupcake Day out of its lofty perch. And that, Bliss thinks, would make the Founders smile. 



a monument. We have had our reputation tarnished a lot in recent years, and this would be a great expression of what is truly important to Arizonans and that we are better than the perception that many have of us.”

State Bar President Joe Kanefield also is a committee member, and he agrees this state is an appropriate site to be first.

“Arizona has been at the center of many important cases involving the interpretation and meaning of several of the Bill of Rights. I’ve been involved in a few myself. Given our history, it’s only fitting that Arizona be the first State to honor the Bill of Rights in this