



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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Students visiting the Arizona Capitol in Phoenix.

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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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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."