

BOB CASSILLY'S LEGACY - With his vision in mind, projects continue to be developed and built at the unique City Museum, but he is missed by workers and family.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) - September 23, 2012

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- Edition: Fourth Edition
- Section: News
- Page: A1

Fifteen years ago, City Museum debuted to big crowds dazzled by its magical mishmash of architectural relics, pop culture ephemera, carved critters and secret passageways.

But another anniversary looms large in the minds of City Museum artists and builders - the one-year anniversary of the death of co-founder and creative mastermind Bob Cassilly. Staffers have no plans to publicly recognize either milestone - but don't think they've forgotten their leader.

"Every day I touch that portrait of Bob in the lobby, and I know a lot of other people do, too," said Rick Erwin, who runs the museum's daily operations.

Cassilly was found dead Sept. 26 at Cementland, his 55-acre outdoor playground overlooking the Mississippi River. Apparently the bulldozer he was driving flipped down a hill. He was 61.

In addition to City Museum, Cassilly left dozens of whimsical sculptures across the region - the turtle hatchlings at Turtle Park, the monarch at the Butterfly House, sea lions at the St. Louis Zoo, apple chairs in Webster Groves and many other works that made St. Louis a more interesting and joyous place to live.

What he did not leave behind was a will. Cassilly's heirs include his widow, artist Giovanna Cassilly, and their two children, as well as his two adult children from his marriage to City Museum co-founder Gail Cassilly. The estate is still in probate.

Those legal issues, however, have no impact on the day-to-day operations of City Museum, which is owned by the Cassilly estate and American Milling, the primary business of Cassilly's longtime business partner and downtown developer David Jump.

Jump has never talked to the media, and he's not starting now. But he does talk to the so-called Cassilly crew, Cassilly's team of builders and artists who worked summers at Cementland and winters at City Museum. Jump hired them all after Cassilly's death as full-time City Museum employees.

"He's interested in doing the projects we've already started, and he really respected Bob as an artist," crew veteran Mary Levi said of Jump. "He's fully committed to what we've started here. We see him here a lot, and I think that makes us feel good about the future."

City Museum, which attracts an average of 600,000 visitors annually, appears to be a good investment for Jump. Erwin said City Museum is coming off its best year yet.

Unlike most museums, it is a for-profit enterprise that makes its money from ticket sales and rental income.

Traditional museums, such as the St. Louis Science Center or Missouri History Museum, could never survive solely on gate receipts. Instead they cobble together their budgets from earned income, tax money, government grants and private gifts.

"We don't have budgets; we don't have timelines," Erwin said. "It has always worked because we've built the things we find fun, and we're lucky that people like to do what we like to do."

In the past year, the crew has built new tunnels and crawl spaces, renovated the gift shop, installed new Louis Sullivan architectural remnants, rebuilt the treehouse on the mezzanine, worked on the outdoor castle and completed many small projects that Cassilly just never got around to doing.

"There are still decisions that we make - 'Well, Bob would do this. Well, we should do it,'" Levi said. "We all miss him being there, but we are still the same family of dysfunctional workers we were before. There are some things we do that have a degree of danger and stress, and you have to trust the people you're working with. Bob was really good at figuring out who those people would be."

Next, Erwin plans to expand to the vacant floors of the 10-story International Shoe Building. He imagines new projects may reflect a vision or style distinct from Cassilly's, though he insists they will adhere to an overall City Museum style.

"We've discussed that there are areas that are very Bob and as we grow, there can be areas that aren't as much Bob," Erwin said. "We

will always respect what he left, but we want to grow, too."

Cassilly's older children, Max and Daisy, also have joined the staff. Max operates the rooftop café, and Daisy is a member of the floor staff.

"She got her start here as slide tester," joked Levi.

"Yeah, my dad would have me climb around Monstrosity before it opened," said Daisy, 23. "He would say, 'Climb until you get scared, and that's where the railings will go.' But I never got scared."

She misses her dad but loves working with the crew members who knew her father so well. Her mother, Gail Cassilly, also spends more time at the museum. After her bitter and public divorce from Bob Cassilly in 2002, Gail Cassilly never entered City Museum. However, she and Cassilly had a reconciliation in the months before his death.

Like Erwin, Daisy Cassilly is pained by the picture of her dad in the lobby.

"But it's getting easier," Daisy said. "And I love being here."

Daisy Cassilly and the crew, however, do miss Cementland, which is owned entirely by the Cassilly estate.

It's hard to know what Cassilly's Cementland would have looked like had he had the time to complete the project.

What happens next is up to Giovanna Cassilly, who is currently residing in Spain. A request for comment was not returned.

"We have no idea what's going to happen there, which is unfortunate because it was really coming together," Levi said. "But there is enough to keep us busy here."

"And our children busy," added crew member Bobby Heinemann.

• Caption: Graphic by Dan Martin • Post-Dispatch Weatherbird cartoon - The fun lives on Photo by Erik M. Lunsford • elunsford@post-dispatch.com Daisy Cassilly, daughter of the late Bob Cassilly, talks with staff member Kevin Morris while they work Thursday at the City Museum. Photo - City Museum founder Bob Cassilly died last year at Cement-land. Photo by J.B. Forbes • jforbes@post-dispatch.com The roof of City Museum is silhouetted against a colorful St. Louis sunset earlier this month. Post-Dispatch File Photo A view of Cementland last September, as framed by a metal sculpture directly across the street on Riverview Drive. Bob Cassilly died in an accident while working on the project. He left no will. Cassilly's widow, Giovanna Cassilly, was unavailable to comment on the project's future. (First Edition photo, A13)

• *Dateline:* 0

• *Record:* 1001887428

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