

Spoils of War

The Liberty Memorial might be a national treasure, but who's watching the chest?

By David Martin
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Carl DiCapo lives on a street that bears his name. The former restaurateur owns a condominium in Santa Fe Place at Crown Center, where Carl DiCapo Drive begins.

DiCapo's family owned Italian Gardens, one of downtown's most iconic restaurants before it closed in 2003. When he wasn't tending to dinner guests, DiCapo volunteered for the Boy Scouts, the Don Bosco Community Center and the Salvation Army. The City Council's resolution renaming a section of Main Street in his honor cited his "tireless participation" in civic causes.

The tireless participant now gets a paycheck.

DiCapo, who is 79, began to draw a salary from the Liberty Memorial Association in 2004, the year Kansas City voters approved a \$20 million bond to pay for construction of the World War I Museum. The museum opened below the deck of the monument last December.

DiCapo was chairman of the Liberty Memorial's board of governors when he went on the nonprofit's payroll. The board, DiCapo says, offered to compensate him based on his efforts to obtain pledges from lawmakers and philanthropists. DiCapo takes credit for raising the \$6.5 million needed to pay the rest of the costs associated with the museum. "No one turns me down, because they know I'm not going to lie to them," he tells me.

A square-dealing septuagenarian could take the project only so far, though. As I wrote a few weeks ago, Kansas City residents are paying for most of the costs associated with the museum

("The Shaft," February 22). The city will spend \$1.4 million this year to pay the debt on the museum bond. An additional \$1.5 million will be spent to operate and maintain the facility.

DiCapo championed the museum's construction, and he has enjoyed more than a feeling of satisfaction during its completion. The Liberty Memorial Association paid DiCapo \$21,000 in 2004. He received \$36,000 in 2005, the last year its tax records are available.

DiCapo insists that he's a bargain, a guy who accomplishes more for less than the fancy professionals charge. "You can't get a fundraiser in this city that's any good," he says.

Still, DiCapo's dual role of chairman and paid consultant raises objections. "That's totally a no-no," says Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy in Washington, D.C. Dorfman says nonprofit board members should not be compensated.

DiCapo's salaried service to Liberty Memorial, it turns out, isn't the only questionable arrangement I've found.

Executive Director Steve Berkheiser, who made \$130,000 in 2005, has employed his wife, Margriet Berkheiser, as the director of administration. She assumed the paid position after working at the monument as a volunteer.

Rolf Snyder, the son of board member Willard Snyder, works at Liberty Memorial as an IT consultant. Willard Snyder was president of the board from 2004 to 2005.

The accounting firm of another board member, Richard Marr, does the Liberty Memorial Association's bookkeeping. Marr recently vacated the board position of treasurer. Marr tells me that the association pays his firm, Marr and Company, \$525 a month for its bookkeeping work.

"All of this doesn't really pass the smell test," Dorfman says. "It sounds like this nonprofit could

use a good refresher course in ethical practices for not-for-profits."

A \$525-a-month accounting job does not a scandal make. But the Liberty Memorial hasn't proved itself to be the city's most trustworthy institution.

For starters, the World War I Museum was thrust upon citizens. The public agreed to build the museum only after the parks board hid its true cost by raiding a 1998 sales tax meant for the monument's restoration. The parks board denied misusing the money, but then-auditor Mark Funkhouser's 2001 audit put the lie to the board's words.

Voters were asked to cough up money for the museum in 2004 because DiCapo and others failed to raise the private donations they said they could. Today, DiCapo blames the city's most prominent art gallery for leaving the donor community broke. "We couldn't get any money from the big boys because they needed \$400 million for the Nelson-Atkins," he tells me.

Faced with criticism, DiCapo and other museum supporters are quick to talk about the project's accolades. "Right now, we are considered one of the 10 best museums in the world," DiCapo says. I haven't seen such a list, but the museum did receive good reviews when it opened. Attendance, I hear, is strong.

Still, the absence of accountability in this town is galling.

DiCapo, Berkheiser and two dozen others who worked on the war museum's campaign were recognized by the City Council last month. Seven council members rose to offer praise. "The cream of Kansas City is right here," Councilman Chuck Eddy said.

Two weeks later, Eddy's Finance Committee approved a final appropriation of \$647,835 to pay for museum construction costs. Eddy said the city was happy to write one last check for the building, "and they'll be standing on their own."

Actually, Chuck, the Liberty Memorial looks like a drag on the budget for years to come. The month the museum opened, Berkheiser asked the city to double its annual subsidy. Request granted.

Berkheiser was out of the country last week, so I didn't get a chance to ask him about the decision to bring his wife on staff. It seems like a surefire way for a boss to invite doubts about his leadership. I've heard that he fired a staffer who argued with Margriet Berkheiser after she admonished the employee for not properly cleaning the doors to the museum.

John Dillingham, the Liberty Memorial Association president, would not comment regarding the two Berkheisers on the payroll, calling it a "personnel matter." He does, however, offer his full support for DiCapo, who left the board in January.

"Carl's the eternal optimist," Dillingham says. "Bless his heart. I wish I could clone him."

He'd need to find another \$36,000 first.

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