Unique vision

South Terrebonne site holds mysterious collection of art

By JOHN McMILLAN
River parishes bureau

C HAUVIN — One January day in 2000, a reclusive bricklayer named Kenny Hill up and left a sculpture garden he had spent 12 years building on the banks of Bayou Petit Caillou.

As he started to walk away, his neighbor, Julius Neal, stopped him.

"Where are you going, Kenny?" Neal asked. Hill pointed to his feet. "Wherever these bring me, that's where I'm going."

Before he left his sacred plot of land in lower Terrebonne Parish, Kenny Hill spent more than a decade creating his unique vision.

That vision consists of more than 100 sculptures dotting a narrow slice of land overlooked by a 45-foot-tall lighthouse. Hill constructed the lighthouse out of 7,000 bricks and adorned it with concrete figures of American Indians, cowboys, Hill himself being lifted up by an eagle, jazz musicians and God.

The body of work he left in Chauvin is "about living and life and everything I've learned," he told Dennis Siporski, chairman of the Nicholls State University art department.

A religious or spiritual theme dominates Hill's entire diorama. Angels with drawn swords guard the portals to the pathways of salvation and torment. Angels fly down from heaven to rescue babies.

Some have eyes, others do not. Some hold flowers and birds and butterflies. One holds an hour glass with a small red cross inside.

According to Siporski, Hill often told people "it's what you take away. It's not for me to explain... I will do nothing after this. It's for people to come here and find themselves."

— Primitive artist Kenny Hill

A sightless angel in buckskin is part of the display created by sculptor Kenny Hill along the banks of Bayou Petit Caillou in Terrebonne Parish. The sitting angel on the left has eyes.
Jesus bears his cross as an eagle lifts up a sculpture of artist Kenny Hill, center, while a menagerie of figures adorns the 45-foot-tall lighthouse Hill, constructed of 7,000 bricks. The sculpture garden in Chauvin is the first project preserved by the Kohler Foundation outside Wisconsin.

One of the last figures Kenny Hill created at his sculpture garden in Chauvin was of himself, his hand over his bleeding heart. Those who know Hill say the sculpture is a remarkable likeness of the artist's face.

Dennis Sipriksi, chairman of the Nicholls State University Art Department, was instrumental in saving a sculpture garden created by recluse bricklayer Kenny Hill on the banks of Bayou Petit Caillou in lower Terrebonne Parish.

The Chauvin Sculpture Garden is open continuously to the public. The Folk Art Museum across the street is open from noon to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday.

The museum contains some works by Kenny Hill as well as other folk artists. It is located at 5337 Bayou Petit Caillou Drive in Chauvin.

Ruth Kohler, president of the Wisconsin-based Kohler Foundation, peers through one of the sculptures created by folk artist Kenny Hill in Chauvin. Kohler calls Hill's sculptures 'magical.'

Advocate photos by Bill Fing

One of the last sculptures Hill completed was of himself. His heart was bleeding. Hill's whereabouts are unknown to those connected with saving the site. He is believed to be about 50 years old. Neal said Hill left because he couldn't pay the note due on his lease. Some rumors have it he is living in another state. Others say he left the country. Neal, whose late wife used to prepare lunch for Hill on a daily basis, said he doesn't know where Hill is. "All I can say is he was a very fine man. He said he was doing this for the community." Now the community and the world can view the strange, compelling work of Kenny Hill thanks to those who recognized its value. "If there's anything I'm proud of in this life, it's saving this site," Sipriksi said. "It's saving this site..."