

'Your story is Our story'

One of the world's most unique sculptures – in both appearance and its reason for being – consists of nine eagle feathers towering 20 feet into the Irish sky.

Entitled *Kindred Spirits*, it is a large, stainless steel sculpture in Bailick Park in Midleton, Ireland. *Kindred Spirits* commemorates the 1847 donation by the Native American Choctaw People to Irish famine relief during the Great Hunger. The gift was made despite the Choctaw themselves living in hardship and poverty and having endured the Trail of Tears.



The sculpture was created by Alex Pentek at the Sculpture Factory in Cork, Ireland, and installed in 2015. The memorial was commissioned by Midleton Town Council, and was officially unveiled and dedicated in June 2017 by Chief Gary Batton of the Choctaw Nation, Assistant Chief Jack Austin Jr. and Councillor Seamus McGrath, County Mayor of Cork. Attending was a 20-strong delegation from the Choctaw Nation.

A plaque in the middle of the structure details how, in 1847, the impoverished Choctaw Nation was able to scrape together \$170 to send to Ireland to help feed starving people. Estimates vary as to what that amount would be in today's dollars, and range from \$5,500 to as much as \$20,000.

But it's not the size of the long-ago gift that resonates with Irish nationals today, but the sacrifice required to make it. Joe McCarthy, East Cork's municipal district officer, said, "Just when they thought nobody cared, a group from across the world reached out to lend a helping hand. These people were still recovering from their own injustice, and they put their hands in their pockets and they helped strangers. It's rare to see such generosity. It had to be acknowledged."

Struggling through harsh conditions, 17,000 Choctaws attempted the perilous journey that came to be known as the Trail of Tears. They were met with disease, starvation and exposure during one of the coldest winters on record. More than 6,000 of them died along the way.

When word reached them about the plight of the Irish, the familiarity of the stories opened wounds that had just started to heal, said Chief Batton. Despite their situation, impoverished and homeless, the Choctaw people pooled their money to send to Ireland. Batton said it was the tribe's way of saying, "Your story is our story."

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Now, 171 years later, the selflessness of the Choctaw Nation still is taught in Irish schools with an emphasis on the fact that they gave even when they couldn't afford to do so.

This lesson teaches us that compassion always has a history, that it isn't generated out of thin air or in a vacuum. Our compassion runs as deep as our wounds. That was certainly true of the Choctaw Indians, whose personal afflictions enabled them to feel a kindred spirit with those suffering on the other side of the world.

But there was more than history involved. We all have to decide how we will manage the pain we experience in life. Will we allow it to defeat us, to embitter us? Or will we allow our pain to guide us when love and compassion are needed?

There aren't many occasions when the poor and disadvantaged are remembered by history. When it happens, you know something exceptional has taken place. In this case, the Choctaws allowed their own personal history to make history.

Perhaps that is a reason for the selflessness of associates in Life Care and Century Park. The pain and suffering of their own experiences fuel their delivery of service with compassion and love.

We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us (1 Thessalonians 2:8 HCSB).

– Beecher Hunter