

**Florida Keys** JULY 21, 2015

## A 50-year tribute to the underwater Christ statue



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With this year marking the 50th anniversary of the submersion of the “Christ of the Deep” statue off Key Largo, Gabe Spataro knew he had to make a dive to honor it.

After all, Spataro, an 83-year-old Korean War veteran who first learned of the statue while on a wine-tasting trip to Italy 54 years ago, was instrumental in orchestrating the statue's move from Genoa, Italy, to Chicago to its final resting spot on the ocean floor.

On Tuesday, Spataro placed two brown wreaths, decorated in orange and gold leaves, over the statue's outstretched arms, which sit about 20 feet below the water's surface. One wreath was to honor "those who lived, worked, and played in the sea," the second to "those who fought and died at sea." He then poured holy water from France into the ocean.

Spataro wore special gloves to touch the statue, which is covered with fire coral that can cause stinging and burning.

"It's not religious to see, like you've got to be a Catholic or a Protestant," Spataro said. "It's a personal thing between you and the feeling you've got in your soul and in your heart. And that's what the statue is all about."

Pete Murray, a volunteer with Diveheart, the nonprofit group that teaches children, adults and veterans with disabilities how to dive, aided Spataro, who is legally blind, in his quest.

"Seeing [Spataro] touch the statue was like seeing it for the first time," Murray said. "I've done maybe 100 dives to [the statue,] but it was amazing watching his hands."

Spataro began diving in 1956, when diving was in its early days. He had just come back from Korea, where he served as an Army supply sergeant and was working at his family's pizza place in Chicago. Two customers had told him about going scuba diving, and he immediately tried it out.

On a wine-tasting trip to Italy, he learned about the statue from Italian dive equipment manufacturer Egidio Cressi. Cressi was making a replica from the mold of Italian sculptor Guido Galletti's *Il Cristo degli Abissi*. Cressi told Spataro he would donate the statue to the Underwater Society of America — but Spataro had to transport it.

Spataro, using his connections with his father's steamship line, brought the statue to Chicago. Using more connections with the Illinois National Guard, he got the statue transported on a Navy Reserve plane to Orlando. The statue finally made it to its home on the ocean floor on Aug. 25, 1965.

Tuesday's trip included five other disabled divers, as well as almost 20 trained scuba divers who aided in the trip. This was Spataro's second dive to the statue. His first dive took place in 2013. He said returning to the statue was "wonderful."

Spataro said he wants to plan a festival to bless and celebrate the statue next year: “Never forget what you want to do because eventually you’ll do it.”

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This is something absolutely beautiful, I honestly think they should give this beautiful place more publicity many people do not know this gorgeous place exists. Not to mention they should honor this lovely gentleman Mr. Spataro who brought this statue to our Florida Keys. A nice gesture of kindness should be given a tribute while he still alive, that he can appreciate it.

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