

Elaine interviewing Charles re Statue of Liberty in Gourin

Charles: Brittany has a rich history with America that dates back from the Revolutionary War. We know that the original Statue of Liberty was a gift from France to the U.S.A., and we've cherished together, as two nations, a lot of common things around liberty and democracy, and equality. That's wonderful for two nations to have that. That story has maybe an extra special place here, because of the story of immigration. The people of Gourin and all the surrounding towns around here – so many of them had to leave – had to go West, and that "West" was the United States or Canada. And, we talk about over 100,000 souls leaving these small villages that were mostly farming villages, over a period of a 100, 120 years to make it in the U.S. And that history, which is so important for this area, is preserved in a number of ways. It's preserved with a museum exhibit each summer in the town of Gourin, but it's front and centre with the Statue of Liberty for everyone here to remember this wonderful story and this wonderful link with America.

Elaine: We talked about the Statue of Liberty and how it came to be here. Why was it necessary to have a new one?

Charles: Time weathers all. It does it to our memories, and that's why I think that's why some people forget this history. It does it to our symbols as well. And there was a statue in the centre of Gourin that was here since the mid-80s, but sadly that statue was being deteriorated every single year, every single winter, where they had to actually bring it in half the year, 'cause it couldn't weather the elements of central Brittany. So, the idea was with the organisation, Bretagne TransAmerique, and the mayor's office and a whole lot of donors, to really preserve this story for a lot longer. And that's where this idea of having a replica of the real Statue of Liberty came about, and saying, "O.K., how do we make this happen?"

Elaine: Who funded the project at this time, because it was Air France, that donated it, I think, the first time around?

Charles: Coming up with something like this is not simple, right? We're in a small town in central Brittany, there's not a lot of funds to do this type of thing, and we knew that to be successful and to make this happen, it had to be grassroots, it had to come from the people of Gourin. So, a tight-knit group of around five to ten people, and that included the mayor's office, came together and said, "O.K., how do we do this? How do we make this happen?" And the idea came, "O.K., let's take a crack at a crowd-funding campaign. We know this is going to cost probably over 70,000 euros, which is a whole lot of money, but we want to make sure that this is something that we don't have to worry about in ten, twenty years. It's going to be here. So, it has to be made in very solid bronze fashion." So, a number of brainstorming sessions, O.K., in Gourin happened and we decided to do this crowd-funding campaign that would last a few months where anyone, anyone in the world can donate for this new Statue of Liberty that was going to be put up in Gourin.

Elaine: I believe that Kengo, was it Kengo involved in ...

Charles: Yes, so we used the platform ... Being in Brittany, it made sense for us to use the platform that is called “Kengo,” and it worked really well. People very simply could go on and make a 5 euro donation, or we were happy when it was a lot higher. For a number of months people came in and donated, and it was very practical. Some people, you know, didn’t like the Internet, so they would just go in the mayor’s office and sign a cheque, but most of the donations were small donations from people who care about this story, care about this region and wanted a Statue of Liberty here in Gourin.

Elaine: So, when was it actually installed?

Charles: Gosh, we’ve just lived a crazy time, right? Global pandemic, COVID-19. Global pandemic actually slowed down a lot what we wanted to do with this statue. Number One: she was under quarantine too. We were not the only ones in quarantine. The Statue of Liberty of Gourin was in quarantine as well, and could not be put out. So, we had to wait for “déconfinement,” post-confinement, where she was delivered and dropped off right after the confinement ended. The problem was, and a lot of people wanted to celebrate this, and we haven’t had a chance to have a big party around it so, that is still in the works and planned. It’s looking like we’re going to have to wait for summer, June-July of 2021, to make that happen. So, big party planned next year.

So, I agree with you, when you say that we’re living in an interesting time, most definitely. And, we’re putting into question a lot of things, from institutions to things that are systematic and that are not positive for human society, but we’re also putting into question the monuments that kind of surround us, right? I think one of the most important things is to know our history and see how we can build upon what we learn from that history, and I think that is a good thing, but I think tearing every single statue down is probably not the right solution. Concerning this statue, I think putting it up was a great symbol during this time. Whereas a lot of statues are coming down, we put up a statue that celebrates an amazing story of immigration; that celebrates friendship between this region here in France, Brittany, and the United States, and also celebrating stories of individual people. But also, putting up a statue for the future—for the future generations and future cooperation, and future friendship. So, for us, I think all of that was part of the process in understanding the current climate, but also being part of the change that is needed, and saying, “Hey, we’re building positively for the future.”

Elaine: Well, thank you very much, Charles. It’s been very interesting and very enlightening hearing the story behind the statue.

Charles: A pleasure.