

Dan Patch statue nearly complete, to be unveiled in June 2018

- [By Christine Schuster | cschuster@swpub.com](#)

When Alexa King recalls growing up in rural Indiana, she remembers a sign near the railroad tracks by the feed mill she frequented that said “Dan Patch raced here.”

Today, King is a world-renowned equine sculptor who was asked to create a sculpture of M.W. Savage and Dan Patch for the city of Savage.

The statue is set to be revealed at 1 p.m. on June 24 — the last day of Dan Patch Days.

In 2017, the Minnesota legislature voted to give \$75,000 to the project, leaving the city to come up with the remaining \$25,000 of the total cost. According to Savage Mayor Janet Williams, the entire amount has been committed and donors will be named, without their contribution amount, on a plaque at the site of the statue.



The Dan Patch Project continues to seek funding from the legislature for a large statue to be installed at the state fairgrounds, costing \$1 million, of which the legacy funding would again provide 75 percent of the total cost.

King is no stranger to public art — in 2008, she was chosen to sculpt the Barboro Memorial that resides in the courtyard at Churchill Downs, the home of the Kentucky Derby. The highly-competitive application process involved presenting intricately engineered design proposals, in which King’s innovative designs

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and ability to depict movement stood out and landed her the job.

“They become a part of the landscape,” King said. She’s been told by guards at Churchill Downs that visitors take photos of the Barboro Memorial at all hours — including snapping photos in the middle of the night.

“It’s permanent and it becomes a part of that community,” King said. When you think about how many people have had their photographs taken in front of them it’s mind boggling.”

How it’s done

Although King’s sculptures vary from tabletop pieces to larger-than-life sculptures, her process remains somewhat the same. She begins by creating an armature — essentially the skeleton of the body she will be sculpting.

Creating the armature involves attaching plumbing pipe to a wooden base to create an elongated “T” shape. From there, aluminum wire is used to create details of the horse, for example, the tail fanning out behind and the desired angle of the neck and head. Aluminum wire is used in statue making because it bends easily while also being strong enough to hold clay. The feet of the body are screwed down into the base so it is stationary and King uses housing insulation and foam to finish making the form.

“Clay is really heavy and you don’t just want to start out with clay on that wire,” King explains.

The clay she uses is similar to the clay used to sculpt cars. King uses an oven or hot water to heat the clay so it’s malleable enough to be applied with her hands.

“It’s an additive and a take-away process,” King said. “I put the clay on and if I don’t like that I can pull it back a little bit and sculpt it. I keep adjusting. It’s a 360-degree process— it’s not like a painting where you’ve only got one side.”

Sculpting history

King began her work on the sculpture of M.W. Savage and Dan Patch a long time before she began working on the form in her studio. While backpacking around Europe two years ago, she remembers listening to audiobooks about Dan Patch while riding the trains.



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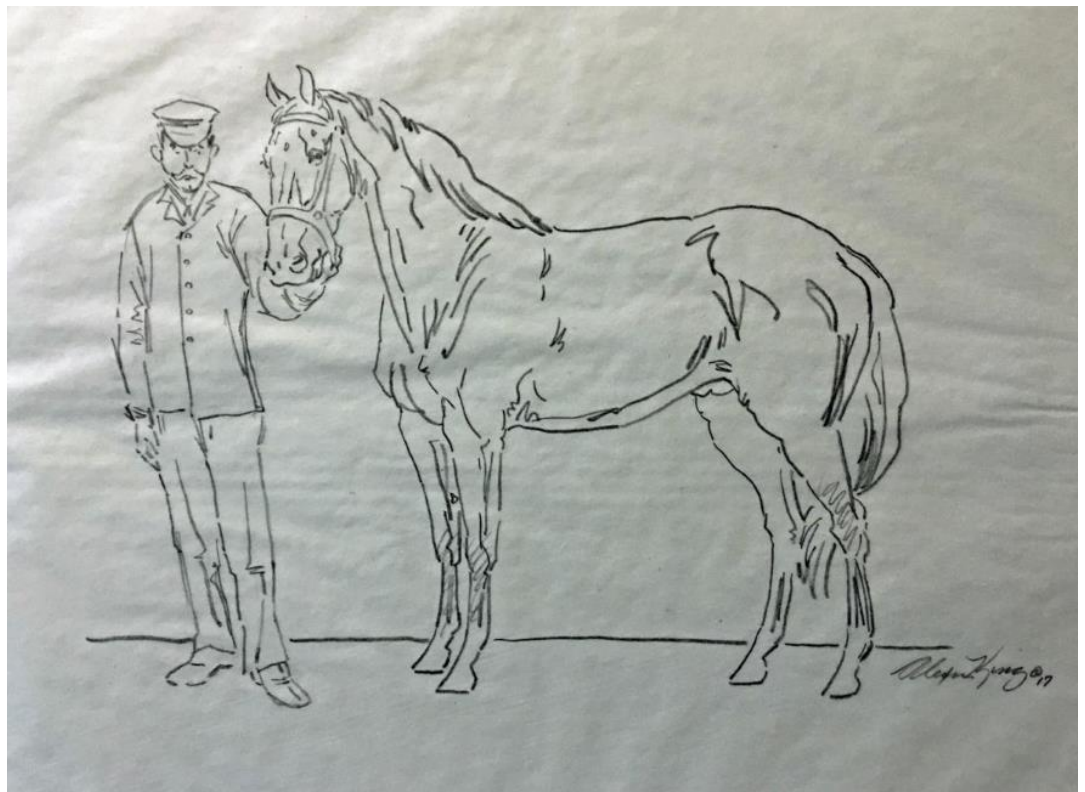
“A lot goes into trying to grasp what it means to the people who saw him, or their grandpa saw him, and what it means to a community that celebrates him,” King said.

She conducted interviews, visited important sights and absorbed every photograph and video of Dan Patch that she could find. She conceptualized the portrait of the two figures as a portrait of them together.

“The biggest thing for me is not to make it a sentimental kind of thing,” King said about her design of the sculpture. “It’s more of a mutual respect. He (Savage) was very professional with the horse — he was a breeder, he drove them, he was in the barn a lot. These horses are very noble in the way that they strike a pose and so are the humans that are with them, so I’m trying to balance them as much as possible.”

During the process, King often wheeled the sculpture into her home so she could continually make adjustments and look at it when she walked by.

“What I’m trying to do is continually get to the point where it looks like a horse as much as I possibly can without it being a slavish rendition of him,” King said about this part of the process. “I want it to have my artistic input into the surface. That’s all the hard, hard work part of it but the last part is to tune it. To go in, with the nice warm clay, roll it in my hands and then push it with the heel of my hand across it to try to animate that surface as much as possible. It’s not a copy of a horse— it’s an artwork.”



Although M.W. Savage and Dan Patch are standing still in the sculpture, King said a lot of work still goes into animating them. She takes note of where the weight is on their foot and what they might be looking at. For M.W. Savage, she carefully gave his back a slight arch and tilted his head up toward the horse.

“He (M.W. Savage) is zoned in on his horse, he’s very proud of him. Dan Patch is standing quietly but alert,” she said.

When King completed the sculpture, she drove it from her home in Wisconsin to Loveland, Colorado to deliver it the foundry she’s been working with for around 15 years. They will complete the lost-wax casting

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process to create the statue. King said that collaborating with people who are familiar with her style and exactly how she wants it to turn out is vital.

“I want something that is satiny and to be able to run your hand over it,” King said.

Once the rubber mold was created, King’s clay model was destroyed and the rubber mold was used to make waxes — a process that puts the sculpture into pieces, which will be cast together and then dipped to give the statue a ceramic shell. The molding process combines the use of a flexible mold material, which is painted on the clay model in layers to copy the exact shape and surface of the model. A plaster mother mold is then placed around the rubber mold to hold the flexible mold for pouring the waxes. The wax is then poured into the molds and then gated with wax gates so the bronze can be poured into the cavity left by the wax that has burned out of the ceramic mold. “I’m always somewhat surprised to see them in bronze because what leaves is a process that keeps changing until I stop on it — until I take the tools and put them down and that’s it,” King said when asked how she feels when she completes her work on a piece. “But then I go back and see the piece in metal and it’s permanent. I can’t change it. Sometimes it’s a little bit hard to look at it and agree with that final product.”

The piece is then sandblasted and polished so it shines gold.

“It knocks your eyes out, it’s just amazing,” King said.

However, gold changes color quickly and so King’s signature patina is applied to her pieces at the end of the process to give it a reddish-brown color and the appearance of age.

King is planning to travel to Loveland, Colorado in early May to see the finishing touches on the statue. She will be attending the unveil in Savage in June.

“Once they’re installed and unveiled, they own that space that they are in,” King said. “It’s not me anymore — it’s the story of the portrait of the people and horse. I just let it go from there.”