

Dolly Parton Statue has become iconic symbol

By Carroll McMahan



“I’m a hometown girl and my hometown is Sevierville, Tennessee,” says Dolly Parton. “I’ve had the good fortune of getting to travel all over this world and I’ve had all kinds of wonderful awards, but I think probably one of the greatest things that ever happened to me in my whole career, in my whole life really, is the statue of me in the courthouse yard in Sevierville.”

In 1985, a group of Sevier County citizens entertained the idea of honoring Dolly with a public sculpture. After preliminary discussions, they approached artist Jim Gray to see if he would be interested in taking on such a commission.

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Gray, who had long been known in the art world for his work in watercolor and oil paintings highlighting the landscape and people of East Tennessee and his seascapes, accepted the challenge and Dolly gave her permission enthusiastically.



However, she was adamant that the funds were to come from the private sector.

A steering committee was formed and Dian Robertson was selected to serve as chairman. The other committee members were Sidney Wade, Geraldine Smelcer, Brenda Daugherty, Ann Kelch, Steve Lane, Debbie Smith and Dwight Ogle. The steering committee appointed a fund raising committee who included: R.B. Summitt, Pat Head Summitt, Geneva Waters, Ruby

Fox, Liz King, Jane Rader, Jack Wicker, John Leeper, Janice Russell, Freda O'Dell, Shirley Matthews, Barbara Blacker, Glenda Johnson, and Judy Wilson.

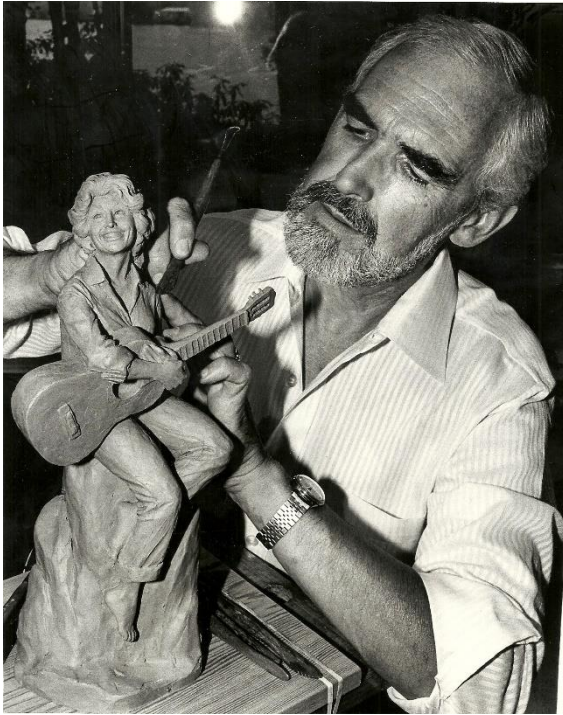
Fund raising activities included a Dolly Look-A-Like Beauty Pageant, an Arts & Crafts Auction, a Benefit Play, and an Alumni vs. Varsity Basketball Game. However, most of the money came from funds solicited from business clubs and corporate and individual donations.

Gray's son Chris suggested that his father have Dolly sitting on a rock, such as a rock in a Smoky Mountain stream.

Gray completed a small clay model of what he hoped would someday be the finished product. After preliminary sketches and the early clay model, his next step was to locate a suitable rock to be the base for his bronze. He found what he was looking for in a big rock pile near Blalock's in Sevierville.

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The finished statue is six and a half feet tall, plus the base. After positioning the rock, Gray did a plaster cast of the top, so the statue would fit properly. Once the skeleton was made of steel, he used about 300 pounds of clay. The work was done in Gray's South Knoxville studio, then moved to Wagner Foundry in Fredericksburg, Virginia where the bronze was actually poured.

On Sunday May 3, 1987, Dolly Parton came back to her hometown to attend two ceremonies. At 2:30 pm she unveiled the new cornerstone for the partially completed Dolly Parton Wellness and Rehabilitation

Center at Sevier County Medical Center.

Then, at 4 pm Gray's impressive statue was unveiled on the lawn of the Sevier County Courthouse. An estimated 500 people crowded closed-off Court Avenue in front of the courthouse for the ceremony. Some arrived as early as 1 pm to ensure a good vantage point.

In his opening remarks Sevier County Executive Larry Waters said he was "glad they placed the statue where they did, because it improves the view from my office. Now I've got an incentive to come to work in the mornings."

Waters also told the crowd that President Ronald Reagan called the county offices on Friday, stating he was sorry that he could not attend the ceremonies.

Sevierville Mayor Gary Wade told the crowd why it was determined that the statue should be placed at the courthouse. "Dolly Parton is one of us," said Wade, "and to every little girl and boy in Sevier County she has been an inspiration, and proof-positive that you can make it if you try."

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“For this reason she has become a historical figure, worthy of permanent recognition,” the mayor said.

Jim Gray also spoke saying he had received more offers for help on this project than any he had ever undertaken. “Everyone wanted to help....carry clay, or anything,” Gray said with a chuckle. “But I wanted to do this one by myself.” Gray said more than 2,000 hours went into the project.



Parton’s remarks were brief, with her acknowledging the attendance of her father, Lee, and several other members of her family as well as legendary Knoxville grocer Cas Walker. “Cas you told ‘em I’d be a star.” Parton said “And I couldn’t let you down.”

Parton joked about the possibility of her statue falling prey to courthouse traditions. “Now I don’t want any of you men down here on Saturday afternoon spitting tobacco juice on my legs,” she said. “But no matter what it looks like maybe it’ll keep the pigeons off the roof.”

The star then turned a bit sentimental saying, “It makes me feel like you folks are proud of me, and I’ve always wanted you to be.”

Following her remarks, Parton made her way to the courthouse lawn to remove the butterfly-adorned cover. The crowd roared its approval when the statue was unveiled.

In the ensuing years, millions of visitors from all over the world have made the pilgrimage to the courthouse to see the famous statue of Dolly Parton.

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The statue was awarded a 2015 Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor. The award is based on the quality of reviews and opinions earned on Trip Advisor in the past year.

Dolly Parton is the most honored female country performer of all time. During her Hall of Fame career, sales of her recordings have reportedly topped a staggering 100 million world-wide. She has won 7 Grammy Awards, 8 CMA Awards, 3 American Music Awards, and is only one of five female artists to win the Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year Award.

In 2006, she was honored by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts for her lifetime contributions to the arts. Yet with all the national and international recognition given her, Dolly Parton calls the statue her "greatest honor, because it came from the people who know me."

