

# A WELL-ALIVED LIFE

Local artist Kath Engler has it all—her art, her family, her friends—but most importantly a tremendous sense of gratitude for where life has taken her.

BY JIM GARVEY  
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WE'RE GOING ON A RIDE IN A MINUTE, BUT FIRST COME INTO THE STUDIO. Note the rusted bicycle chains hanging over here. The animal skulls, sharks' teeth, sea glass and shells on the shelf. The vat of gray goo on the floor.

Now lift your eyes to the carvings against the window, the ancient sculpted human figures standing against the wall, the weather-worn columns in the side room. It's out of that rust and bone and goo that Kath Girdler Engler creates the art you see in various stages of completion in this garage-turned-studio. It all starts with junk.

Engler is Augusta's pre-eminent sculptor. But when she sculpts, it's not out of marble or wood, but paper pulp. That's the goo in the vat. She takes stacks of the *New York Times*—the great gray oracle has less color in it than most other papers—and soaks them in water. When the paper turns to mush, she drains out the water, adds glue, preservatives and hardening agents; then she uses it almost like clay, fashioning bodies, architectural details, anything she wants, embedding the found objects into this shell. It's very tough stuff when it's dry. To get the aging effect she wants, she saws it, grinds it, burns it with a torch, paints pigment on it. And *voilà!* These sculptures, though brand new, look like ancient, broken artifacts dug from the ground, encrusted with the detritus of centuries, telling tales of peoples long gone, surviving in this time- and nature-eaten way. ▶





"I love found objects altered by nature. Imagine an archeological dig and all these things embedded in it." That's what much of her work looks like. Hence her obsession with the rusty, the broken, the discarded. "I'm on a quest for rusty bike chains. Bike chains are awesome, beautiful."

Though Engler works in many artistic media, it's sculpting that gives her the most satisfaction. "I love doing the big sculptures. They're the things I'm leaving behind when I'm gone. There's so much more of me in my sculpture than there ever will be of me in my grave."

Now the grave's not something she's expecting any time soon, but it's something she thinks about after breast cancer five years ago.

"Cancer puts everything in perspective. It made me a lot more self-indulgent. I lost a lot of weight, but I didn't want anyone to look at me and say, 'Ooo, she's goin' down.' So I started to care about eating well and now I love to eat. I was tunnel vision with work, not that much with or for friends. Then all of a sudden, when I was sick, friends did so much for me that I want to give something back. So now I spend lots of time with my friends."

Her bilateral mastectomy didn't affect her artistic output, though—or so she thought. But now she looks at a figure in her living room that she sculpted in that period and realizes what she didn't realize then. It's a pregnant form with broken-open areas you can see into. "An empty vessel. I wasn't conscious then of the body parts I was taking away. I was hacking off the breast area. Now I realize, this is so Freudian! But it was all unconscious then and, aside from a couple of pieces I did, I don't think anyone will be able to say, 'This came from your post-cancer period.'"

The studio is Engler's imagination factory, where pulp and junk and shells and leaves and pigment and bicycle chains become whatever she dreams. Here she wears her old jeans and sings at

*Many of Engler's sculptures, though new, look like ancient artifacts dug from the ground, telling tales of peoples long gone.*

the top of her lungs while she listens to Josh Groban or Andrea Bocelli. Here her own ideas and instincts lead where they will. Enough people like where they lead that her work has been selling very nicely at the Mary Pauline Gallery on Broad Street and won Best of Show last year in the Southeastern Juried Exhibition at the Mobile Museum of Art.

But Engler is probably better known for her public sculptures, the monumental bronzes she does not just for herself but for those who commissioned them. You've gazed at, walked around and maybe stroked her work if you've spent any time in Augusta. There's one at Augusta State University, two at MCG, another in the lobby of University Hospital and the newest by the Canal Basin on 13th Street near Broad at the entrance to the Walton Rehabilitation Hospital campus. The sculptor is happy to talk about them. Hop in. First stop, ASU.

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“Cultural Triad,” an abstract Picassoesque celebration of the visual arts, drama and music, stands in a fountain at the entrance of ASU’s Maxwell Performing Arts Theatre. “This is numero uno, my first commission. I have a fondness for ASU and all the people I’m connected with here.” Engler had moved to Augusta in the mid-1970s, hoping to enter MCG’s medical illustration program. She had studied art in Indiana, then went into nursing to stave off starvation. She got a bachelor’s in art at Augusta College in preparation for MCG, studying with Jack King, Genie Comer and Nate Bindler, among others. But once she started working in clay and ceramics, she knew that was what she loved. She graduated in 1981 and never went into medical illustration.

“Harry Jacobs said, ‘You ought to do something in front of the PAT.’ So I did. It took me two years. I was nursing at St. Joseph, working the night shift, going to school during the week. I made no money on this at all, but it was such a huge opportunity for someone just getting out of school.” Nopi Barnard of the college’s development office helped her raise money for the project, the college gave her a studio, Georgia Iron Works donated the materials and facility.

The central figure, a conductor, is a nod to Harry Jacobs, the founder of the Augusta Symphony. It is flanked by figures representing drama and the visual arts. All three are inscribed with the names of famous practitioners of these arts. “Unfortunately, I misspelled ‘Mondrian,’ but it’s cast in bronze and I can’t do anything about it. It’s only been noticed once.” If you look closely, though, you’ll find the name “Girdler” spelled correctly. “I put my name in there with all the famous ones. It’s on the mallet.”

Why do all three figures look like women? “What makes you think they’re all women? The design is abstract, flat. Well, okay, maybe I was making the figure that represents art *moi* because I was so sure I was going to be great and famous.”

The piece was installed in 1986, the



heavy bronze pieces lowered into place by a crane. “It was so exciting watching it installed. Till they put them up, I had no idea if they’d stand true. They went in and wow! Beginner’s luck. If I had this commission now I’d make the figures larger but more slender—they look a little heavy to me now. I’d never done anything like this before and I thought it needed lots of support.”

Back in the car, down Walton Way to the MCG medical complex, zig-zagging through a maze of one-way service roads to permit-only parking lots the public never sees, we come to a hidden courtyard behind the Greenblatt Library. There bursting with energy, pride and athletic musculature stands “The Graduate,” completed in 1989. No abstraction here. This graduate might be a Greek athlete except for the graduation hat he’s doffing and his gown swirling in ribbons around him. ►

*“The Graduate,” which is tucked away behind MCG’s Greenblatt Library, was done in classical style because it was supposed to stand at the Old Medical College Building with its classical columns.*

I did this in the classical style because it was supposed to stand at the Old Medical College building with its classical columns. In preparation I did a lot of research in the library. I read antiquarian books from early days of MCG, researched old photos. I wanted the statue to celebrate not just physicians, but all the medical professionals graduating from MCG. You see the diagonal the arms make? Well, if this were placed where it was designed to be, at the Old Medical College, those arms would draw a straight line from the old MCG to the new. I'm into things like that. But then the statue never made it to Telfair Street. It was supposed to be temporary here, but after almost 20 years I doubt it's going to be moved.

"Look at the good job I did on the hands! They're quite amazing! I like them. I'm really bad at hands."

And those strong, graceful legs? The model for them was amateur runner and Fat Man's owner Brad Usry.

It's just a short walk to the Children's Medical Center. Here Engler works with kids in the oncology/hematology outpatient clinic every Monday. "I come in and do projects with them—draw, build, play with them, do tattoos. After having cancer, I realize how tough and nonchalant these kids are." She introduces herself to them: "Hi, I'm Kat. I'm an artist and I'm here to work with you. Did you ever come to the building and notice that big, weird-looking thing out front? I did that!"

That big, weird-looking thing is "The Nature of Healing," a 20-foot-tall abstraction of three tendrils just outside the main entrance. Because of her love for CMC and its young patients, she eagerly accepted a commission to create a sculpture for this building. But coming up with a design took blood, sweat and tears. "I filled sketchbooks with ideas. Nothing seemed right. One day I was just flipping through them and, on the first page of the first sketchbook, I had drawn the paperwhites on my kitchen table leaning toward the sun. I hadn't even drawn them for that project, but I'd



saved that drawing and it turned out to be the most important one. It's amazing how things come about."

She was very nervous the day she showed the committee of doctors the maquette, or small model, of her idea. "I was sure they would fight me. But everyone was thrilled with it. I couldn't believe it."

Completed in 1999, the sculpture is of three organic forms looking like tendrils growing from the ground. The tendrils are whimsical, childlike, and as they lean toward their source of light, they lean toward the building, the source of healing. The three shoots are of different heights, suggesting a child and parents. On the three shoots are textures that look like handprints. A committee of kids had helped with the design of the Children's Medical Center—that's why it looks like it's made of Legos—and after the unveiling of the sculpture, the kids ran over to it and pressed their hands into the prints in the sculpture. Engler beams at the memory. "I hadn't intended that, but I love it."

That same year, 1999, University Hospital wanted to honor Augusta's legendary obstetrician, Dr. "Curly" Watson. This was to be no abstraction, but a realistic rendering of the man who had brought thousands of Augustans into the world. "They wanted a bust, but

*Engler works with Zackary Kimel, an out-patient in the oncology/hematology clinic at Children's Medical Center where she volunteers on Mondays. Below: The three figures in "The Nature of Healing" (at the entrance of CMC) are three shoots of different heights, suggesting a child and parents.*



## “I’m...very aware of what a good deal I have in the world.”

I don’t do busts. How creative is that? I could do a full realistic figure that would say a lot more about this man than just his head. He was known for walking into the hospital always in his scrubs, always with his hat on, and I wanted to show that. So they said, ‘Yes.’”

The sculpture was to be a surprise. That presented a challenge because, to do a 360-degree rendering, she would need to take multiple photographs of Watson. The solution was to tell him that she had been commissioned to photograph the whole staff. He wasn’t suspicious then the morning she came to take his picture, but as he was walking out the door she snuck one more of his back. “He turned around and looked at me with this expression, ‘Why the hell is she taking a picture of my butt?’”

The statue of Watson in his scrubs gently holding a newborn stands in the University Hospital lobby. It is an excellent likeness both from the front and the back.

Now let’s cross Walton Way at 13th Street. You can’t miss the “Boatmen” there poling their Petersburg boat, announcing their arrival with a blow on the horn from the bow. “That’s my new baby, my pride and joy.”

Dennis Skelley, president and CEO of Walton Rehabilitation Health System, called Engler one day to see if she’d like to do a piece for the hospital. Commissions are nice, but they come with strings, of course. The artist can’t let the creative imagination lead where it will, but must answer to committee members and ultimately produce something to their liking. But this was different. Skelley gave her total creative freedom. His directions were simple: “Do something about the history of the area.” And when he showed her where he wanted the sculpture, she couldn’t believe it.

“I was sure it would be out of the way by a building.” But here it was towering above one of the busiest corners in Augusta.

*Engler’s newest sculpture, “Boatmen,” is a tribute to the Augusta Canal and its historical importance to Augusta.*

Engler saw instantly that the history of this area was tied to the canal. The site looked down into the canal basin where the Petersburg boats would unload their produce from the plantations, turn and head back upstream. She studied old photographs; she read Ed Cashin’s *Brightest Arm of the Savannah*; she learned about how the canal water fell over turbines, powering the mills that kept Augusta alive. She wanted all of that in her sculpture.

And there it is. You don’t even need to get out of your car to see it. You don’t need to know art history or Augusta history to understand it. You can feel the movement, watch the water flow, see the strength and joy in the three boatmen. It’s heroic and playful at the same time. It stirs the blood and makes you smile.

It took design ingenuity to figure out how to cast and truck all these pieces from the foundry in Florida to the site. Then it took trial and error, improvisation and bloody hands to assemble all the parts and install them with a crane rented for \$100 an hour; but 12 hours later it was done. “It was a growth experience. I’ve had more comments on this piece than anything else I’ve done. It’s made of elements anyone can understand and appreciate. Darn it!” She cleaned off the droppings left by an appreciative bird.

“I’m very content, very aware of what a good deal I have in the world. I have a little bit of everything—privacy, freedom to work, people when I get too solitary, lots of exercise as a personal fitness trainer. I have a happy life.” ❖

