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TOP STORY

Kulzer calls butter sculpting the 'best job I've ever had'

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Gerry Kulzer smiles underneath his face mask while sculpting Meeker County dairy princess Maggie Meyer. Kulzer said of the things he enjoyed the most about becoming the Midwest Dairy butter sculptor this year was talking with the 10 young women who serve as ambassadors for the state's dairy industry.

STAFF PHOTOS BY BRENT SCHACHERER

Gerry Kulzer admits he might not have been much fun as a Minnesota State Fair-goer.

While family and friends were eager to wander the fairgrounds and sample all those fair foodstuffs, visit the midway and see all the other sights, Kulzer, an art teacher and sculptor, wanted to hang out in one building.

All day, if he could get away with it.

“Back in the ‘90s, I would come in here,” Kulzer said, looking around a nearly deserted Dairy Building on a mid-August afternoon. It’s in that building, of course, where butter carving takes place. For 48 years, sculptor Linda Christensen spent 10 days in a cooler, carving the likenesses of the state’s dairy princesses out of 90-pound blocks of butter.

And as far as Kulzer was concerned, that was THE attraction of the Minnesota State Fair. Postpone the Pronto Pups. Mothball the Midway. Suspend the sights.

Butter sculpting was where it was at.

“I’ve told this story to a few people,” Kulzer explained. “You didn’t — before the internet — you didn’t see people work unless you visited their studio and spent the day with them.

“And how many artists would open up a studio and say, ‘Oh yeah, come on in,’” he said “So, it was fascinating to come here to the State Fair, and see a sculptor make things. You’d never experience that anywhere else. So it was interesting and fascinating to see how she worked that, that block into a person’s face.”

That fascination eventually made Kulzer himself the attraction.

On Saturday, the Litchfield resident wrapped up 10 days of sculpting in the same cooler-studio he once watched Christensen perform her craft. He has become the heir to Christensen's unique sculpting legacy.

It was a little different this year, of course. With the State Fair canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic, few people — outside of families of the 10 dairy princesses and a seemingly endless string of media — saw Kulzer at work. But by the end of his 10-day experience, he sounded thrilled.

"It's the best job I've ever had," Kulzer said. "I'm playing with butter, which is like clay. And I'm also getting to talk with these 10 girls ... learning the ins and outs of the dairy industry. It was just a fun 10 days, really."

Kulzer wound up with the best job he ever had after spending the past two years as Christensen's apprentice. It was a door that opened to him, at least in part, because of those days spent watching Christensen carve butter busts of the dairy princesses back in the 1990s.

After one of those State Fair visits, he checked out the Midwest Dairy Association's website and sent a tentative email from its "contact us" tab.

"I just said, 'Hey, if Linda ever wants to quit or retire, kind of put my name in there. I'm sort of interested,'" Kulzer recalled. "Nothing happened."

At least that's what it seemed. And then, one day a few years ago, he received a Facebook message from Melissa Tangen, a former dairy princess and current dairy princess coordinator for Meeker County American Dairy Association, who happened to be a former student of Kulzer's when he taught art at Litchfield High School.

"She said, 'Hey, they're thinking, Midwest Dairy, is thinking about a transition plan for when Linda retires, would you be interested?'" Kulzer said. "I said, 'Yeah!'"

He was called in to audition two years ago and showed enough talent to be asked back to work with Christensen behind the scenes during last year's State Fair.

"I got to carve a block with her," Kulzer said. "She carved one side, I carved the other side. And she showed me how she would do it, so that I could kind of try to mimic it on my side. And surprisingly, it turned out to be a coherent sculpture."

Kulzer, 51, has taught art to students from kindergarten through 12th grade over the past 27 years in the Litchfield and ACGC school districts, and at Holy Trinity in Winsted. This fall, he'll start on a 28th year of teaching, now in the Sauk Rapids-Rice district, teaching classes in computer graphics and photography for juniors and seniors.

He also has his own sculpture business, Kulzer Design Studios, and has worked for Brodin Studios.

Despite that resume, Kulzer says he had no problem becoming a student again.

"Linda would say, 'OK, well, look at the eye here. Here's how I would do that,'" Kulzer said. "And she would tell me, 'Well, try this. Try that.' So, she was very helpful, trying to, you know, get me up to speed with how to work that butter, so that it was reasonably fast and reasonably accurate."

During the State Fair in 2018, Kulzer worked in a cooler in the back of the dairy barn, sculpting a dairy association staff member as a trial for a little more than eight hours.

"I didn't consider (the sculpture) complete, but my hands were cramping up so bad, I had to physically open my fingers, because they were so cramped up with the cold and pressing the butter so hard," Kulzer said. "The next year, I think it was probably eight hours, maybe a little less, because Linda was helping and we were playing off each other."

It was after last year's State Fair that Kulzer received a formal offer to become the next butter sculptor, as part of a transition plan that would see Christensen step away after 50 years of carving butter heads.

The plan was for Christensen, a California resident, to continue to do the bulk of the sculpting during this year's fair, with Kulzer doing "three or four."

"And then the pandemic hits," Kulzer said "We were wondering how things would work. In June, Linda finally made the decision of saying, 'OK, I'm not comfortable coming.'"

Midwest Dairy officials turned to Kulzer, and he agreed to take on the mantle a little sooner than anticipated — with no small amount of trepidation.

"It'll be scary, but I'll try my best and see what happens," Kulzer told Midwest Dairy organizers.

In a nod to Christensen's nearly half-century role as butter sculptor — and to the symmetry the two had displayed in their joint carving a year earlier — Midwest Dairy arranged to have Christensen join Kulzer via Zoom for the first sculpture this year, of Princess Kay of the Milky Way Brenna Connelly of Byron. Kulzer wore a video camera strapped to his head that allowed Christensen to see things as he saw them.

"That was nice to have her in there (in the carving booth) the first day with Princess Kay," Kulzer said. "She gave me some hints of what I should do, and she could see things in the camera that I was kind of not noticing.

"I've been doing this for a long time," Kulzer said of sculpting. "But I appreciate she has been doing it for 49 years. So anyone with that much experience, you've got to just enjoy and learn from their experience. She's such a wonderful person. To have her working with me, I appreciate that."

Christensen will be back at the State Fair next year, to carve in person — assuming an end to coronavirus pandemic restrictions by then. But after that first day of carving this year, Kulzer was on his own to carve this year's other nine dairy princesses.

And though he leaves no doubt that he enjoyed the experience, it also was an arduous task at times. Among the most challenging aspects, Kulzer said, was sculpting against the clock, as each bust has to be completed in a day.

"Normally, if I accept a commission, I want two weeks to work on it," Kulzer said. "So doing this in a day is really different."

His response to the tight timeline was a start fast "and just hack, hack, hack, hack away at" the 90-pound block of butter, trying to establish the basic form early in the day and leave more time for details later.

Most days, he said, he reached a point by early afternoon that his few visitors and dairy princess subject commented that the work looked near completion.

"That's a good feeling; then I know I could leave it and people would still be satisfied," Kulzer said. "But, you know, I could work on this for another three days, three eight-hour days, before I'd be satisfied with it, changing things here and there."

The logistics of sculpting dairy princesses won't allow for that kind of perfectionism, of course.

Challenging, yes. But also rewarding for an artist like Kulzer who enjoys the unique aspects of sculpting people.

"Artists tend to work in a series. You'll see a painter, and they'll do landscapes ... that look similar," Kulzer said. "I can't. Once I do something once, I don't want to do it again, except for portraits of people, because every person's face is a little different. So it's like doing something totally new again."

And just as the art is different, so is the subject's story, as Kulzer learned from the conversations he had with the 10 princesses inside the carving booth.

“Each girl comes from a different farm and they do things differently,” Kulzer said. “It was interesting. I just feel honored to be a part of Midwest Dairy and to be able to be kind of an ambassador, I guess, like the princesses. It’s a great organization and it does great things for farmers who are part of it, and for all of us, really.”

He looks forward to having many more conversations in coming years — with dairy princesses, the media and visitors to the Dairy Building to watch him work. And he expects what he learned in his first year of butter sculpting will help him become even better next year.

“The last one today, everything flowed,” Kulzer said Saturday evening. “I got done early, and everything went well. Each one will get a little better.

“I just really enjoyed myself this year,” he added. “It’s an honor really. It’s amazing. When you’re having fun doing your job, that’s when you do it well. That’s what the last 10 days was for me. It was the best job I’ve ever had.”

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