

NEWS

Minnesota State Fair is canceled, but dairy princesses are still being immortalized in butter

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There were no sweaty crowds clutching sweating malt cups and dripping cones shuffling to get a better view. There was no smoke drifting in from the billowing clouds next door at Pork Chops On A Stick.

There were no floral spectaculars or Crop Art displays at the Agriculture-Horticulture Building just up the street, no bubbling cheese curds in the Food Building, no screams from the Midway.

But — as it has since 1965 — a piece of the Minnesota State Fair still lives on the hallowed grounds at Falcon Heights, despite the COVID-19 cancellation of the 2020 get-together.

Inside a refrigerated glass booth in the Dairy Building on Thursday, the newly crowned 67th Princess Kay of the Milky Way was having her likeness sculpted from a 90-pound block of butter. Crowned on Wednesday night, Brenna Connelly's first official duty as ambassador for the dairy industry was to sit for the traditional three-dimensional chilled artwork.

Connelly's countenance was first on the block for sculptor Gerry Kulzer. The Litchfield artist took up the task this year when Linda Christensen, who's been the artist in the icebox for 48 years, did not travel from her home in California. Christensen will be joining the activity virtually several times during butter sculpting. After the 19-year-old Princess Kay from Byron, Minn., each of the nine finalists will be carved over the following nine days.

The butter booth where the sculpting takes place is set at 40 degrees. It's not rotating slowly like it does when crowds are watching during the Fair and COVID-19 precautions have the sculptor and subject masked, 6 feet apart and separated by plexiglass. When Kulzer needs to see her face, Brenna goes outside the booth and sits on a ladder without her mask. He also refers to her photo, which hangs behind her.

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Kulzer has been in butterknife knighthood, so to speak, for two years, apprenticing under Christensen. Christensen intends to return in 2021 for her 50th year of involvement in the event, then turn the crown over to Kulzer, who usually works with clay.

During a break from carving on Thursday afternoon, clad in butter-spattered raingear (the same type his mentor Christensen wears on dairy duty), Kulzer said he was originally supposed to step in to sculpt three or four butterheads this year as transition, but the pandemic put him in the cooler for the full set of 10.

"It would have been wonderful to have Linda here," Kulzer said, "to compare, contrast and back me up." But his apprenticeship with Christensen had him learning by replicating one half of a face after she did the other. She visited via Zoom on Thursday.

When Kulzer was getting started in the '90s, he said, there weren't many opportunities to watch other sculptors at work, unless you visited their studios — or the Minnesota State Fair. He visited the Fair and watched Christensen ply her craft in the revolving cooler. It inspired Kulzer to contact Midwest Dairy, which sponsors Princess Kay, and got an audition two years ago. The dairy promotion group liked what they saw.

'IT LOOKS GOOD'



Kulzer sculpts the 67th Princess Kay of the Milky Way, Brenna Connelly, in butter. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

Masked and watching the sculpting with his family in matching T-shirts for Brenna, her dad, Craig Connelly, liked what he saw, too. "It looks good," Craig Connelly said. "Way better than I could do."

Brenna, a sophomore majoring in ag education and animal science at the University of Minnesota, works at her cousin's dairy farm near Byron. The Connells have been in the area since the 1850s, with a large extended family, said Craig Connelly, who raises beef cows on a hobby farm. He and his wife work outside the farm. Other cousins farm in the area, as well.

Brenna said she was introduced to dairy cows when she was 6 at her cousin's farm two miles down the road. "That's really when all that passion started," she said. She liked the temperament of dairy cows and showed them in 4-H and FFA. The dairy farm has been in the family for three generations.

The new Princess Kay is disappointed she won't get to mingle with the crowds at the 2020 State Fair as a goodwill ambassador for the state's dairy industry, but hopes she'll be able to visit county fairs next year. And virtual visits allow her to reach more counties throughout Minnesota.

Brenna and the others who are immortalized in yellow get to take her butterheads home after the work is done. Her dad is planning a big pancake breakfast for friends and family and Brenna intends to donate some to the food bank in Rochester.

Kulzer, who teaches in Litchfield, has a sculpture studio and works with a company that does bronze monuments, grew up on a farm. The family made a lot of their own food, including their own butter, he said. But he didn't sculpt it. His mother would not have approved: "We worked hard for that food. You don't play with it."

The sculpting continues through Aug. 22. Updates on the sculpting will be livestreamed on the [Princess Kay Facebook page](#).