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TOP STORY

WKU community art project lets creativity blossom

AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 25 min ago



Patrick Dougherty, known around the world for his large-scale sculptures woven with tree branches, has always shied away from being called an artist.

For one, he didn't like the baggage linked with the term – specifically the notion that artists need talent to have permission to create.

“Talent isn't irrelevant. It just isn't the issue,” he told guests at Western Kentucky University's Kentucky Museum during a talk about his work Tuesday.

“I had the right to make what I wanted,” he said. “Basically, I could do as much work as I could afford.”

Over the last 30 years, Dougherty has built more than 250 works that have been seen worldwide, from Scotland to Japan, Brussels and the U.S., according to his website at stickwork.net.

His latest work has been in development in the last few weeks on the grounds of the Kentucky Museum. Volunteers have helped strip leaves from branches, which are then composted, and woven with branches of poplar and sugar maple.

“Sugar maple is really tough to work with,” Dougherty said in an interview after the talk. “I mean it's very flexible but it's just a brute ... And then the poplar is really flexible but it breaks very easily. So, you know, we've got two disparate kinds of wood we're working with.”

Derick Strode, assistant director of academic services at WKU's Gatton Academy, helped strip leaves off branches and prepare the material.

"It's a very sustainable project," Strode said.

Strode said the project at WKU will resemble an arch. Dougherty's sculptures typically last for about two years, but the temporary nature of Dougherty's work didn't deter Strode.

"The idea that it's used with natural materials, something that's not going to be durable for more than two or three years, I've never been bothered by that," he said. "It's kind of exciting to me. It's a piece of time in that respect."

Strode has helped get Gatton Academy students involved, too. A small group of students helped him prepare the branches and another group is planning to help Oct. 19, the last day of the project.



Dougherty said the idea to use tree limbs struck him "like Paul being struck off his horse on the way to Damascus." While driving home in North Carolina, he saw workers clearing tree limbs from the side of the road.

"They're plentiful. They're renewable, and it's just like having a giant warehouse at your fingertips," he said.

Dougherty didn't always plan to be an artist.

Born in Oklahoma, he was raised in North Carolina, where he earned a bachelor's in English from the University of North Carolina. He then earned a master's in hospital and health administration from the University of Iowa before returning to the University of North Carolina to study art.

For Dougherty, much of his artistic journey has involved learning to give himself permission to create.

“The best state of making is one in which the person is unselfconscious but fully themselves,” he said.

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Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.