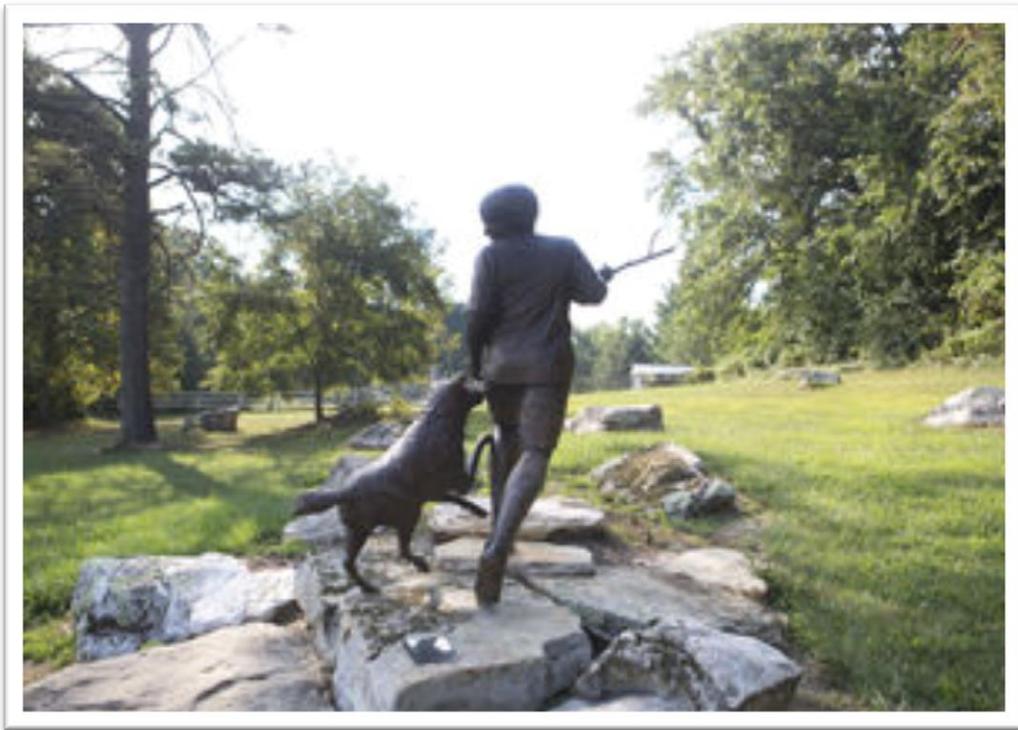


Branch Sculpture Captures Moving Tale

Establishing a memorial garden with a sculpture of her late son, Luke, and his beloved dog, Boba, has helped Jo Lynn Draper of Moneta come to terms with her son's death.



Jo Lynn Draper, Luke Woody's mother, intends for Betty and Polly Branch's bronze statue "A Game of Fetch" to commemorate the bonds between people and pets. (ERICA YOON | The Roanoke Times)

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Roanoke sculptor Betty Branch is celebrating the 35th anniversary of her downtown studio this month.

A prolific and popular artist, her sculptures large and small are ubiquitous in the Roanoke Valley.

"Fallen Firefighter," a memorial to firefighters killed in the line of duty, kneels solemnly in front of the Virginia Museum of Transportation. The little girl reading a huge book in "Once Upon a Time" perches inside the entrance to the Roanoke City Main Library, while a young boy reclines with another book in "A Friend for Life," outside the South County Library. Branch's abstract "Annie's Peace" spreads its wings in Vic Thomas Park.

Her fine art sculptures can be found in the collection of internationally acclaimed Lexington photographer Sally Mann, inside and outside the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, and inside the Taubman Museum of Art. In fact, the Ann Fralin Award trophy, given every year by the Taubman staff to honor women who have made extraordinary contributions to arts and culture, is a miniature replica of Branch's sculpture "Isabel." (The year Branch herself was the winner, the museum came up with a different trophy.)

But one of the 81-year-old artist's most whimsical outdoor sculptures is still little known, even though it's stood on the **Saint Francis Service Dogs** campus in Roanoke County for about two years. Created in collaboration with her daughter, Polly Branch, it depicts a boy playing fetch with his dog — and there's a moving story behind it.

"A Game of Fetch" portrays the late Luke Woody and his beloved dog, Boba (named after the Star Wars character Boba Fett). The sculpture is part of the **Luke Woody Memorial Garden**, funded by his mother, Moneta resident Jo Lynn Draper.

Woody died in 2002 at age 22 from a drug overdose. For Draper, the process of volunteering with Saint Francis Service Dogs and commissioning the sculpture and garden memorials was part of coming to terms with her son's death, and celebrating the positive aspects of his life.

“It took a couple of years to work through the anger over what he had done to himself,” said Draper, 67. By working with the nonprofit, “I was trying get something positive out of something that was really so devastating.”

Woody loved dogs. Boba, who lived until 2013, was the dog he owed in the last years of his life. The sculpture presents a flight of fancy, as Luke is portrayed as much younger than he actually was when he and Boba played together.

Draper discovered after her son’s death that he wrote poetry. The garden includes a walk around a pastoral pond, and a plaque inscribed with a poem Woody wrote about playing fetch with Boba by the New River, called “Moments Like These.”

“Oh, how time stands still like deep-rooted trees,” he wrote. “Ah, the simpleness of moments like these.”

“It was from the heart,” Draper said. “It described a day that he loved.”

The garden is meant not just to memorialize her son, but to commemorate all bonds between people and their pets, and to provide a space for quiet meditation, she said.

Draper and Betty Branch had known each other for many years because of their family businesses, Draper Paving and Branch & Associates construction.

With help from her daughter, Polly, Betty Branch sculpted young Luke about to toss a stick. Polly Branch sculpted Boba running beside him. “The idea of celebrating the bond that there was between the boy and the dog was a very inspiring motivation for me,” Betty Branch said.

“I think she really caught the essence of a boy and his dog,” Draper said.

Though Betty Branch is best known for her public art, she creates a wide range of art, including abstract sculpture and drawings. This month offers a chance to a view a fuller spectrum of her work. Friday through December 17 from 2 to 6 p.m., she’s holding open house hours in her studio at 123 Norfolk Avenue S.W. Four of her children — Patrick Branch, Sally Grace Branch, Polly R. Branch and Bonny Branch — will also have art on display. Dec. 12 from 1 to 2 p.m., the Branches will host activities for children at the studio.

The open house also celebrates the Betty Branch Sculpture Studio and Gallery’s 35th anniversary. “Downtown Roanoke is such an eclectic place,” Betty Branch said. “It’s been an honor and a great pleasure to have my studio down here.”

For more information, call 344-4994 or visit BettyBranch.com.



Artist Betty Branch