

Downers Grove grad helps restore historic sculptures

By **DIANE KRIEGER SPIVAK**
editorial@mysuburbanlife.com

CHICAGO – When Natalie Murray graduated from Downers Grove South High School in 2009, she planned to go into musical theater.

Fast forward six years and Murray, now assistant manager of the foundry at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has just completed an unprecedented project in the renowned school's history. Murray was part of a small team that used SAIC's foundry to recast broken portions of three century-old bronze sculptures.

The 6.5-foot figures representing Olympic athletes were created in 1906 by sculptors Leon Hermant and Carl Beil to adorn the Illinois Athletic Club where they were erected on the facade in 1908. The building, now called the MacLean Building, 112 S. Michigan Ave., across from the famed museum attached to the school, is part of SAIC's campus.

"The statues had become sort of an eyesore," said Brad Johnson, executive director of Fabrication and Instructional Resources at SAIC.

"We took them down and determined it was the best thing for us to restore them.



Photo provided

Downers Grove South graduate Natalie Murray was part of a small team at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago that recast and restored three century-old bronze sculptures.

The MacLean Building is on the National Register of Historic Places and SAIC is essentially a docent for the building. As a docent we thought it was really important we take care of those sculptures."

SAIC enlisted the services of Conservation of Sculpture and Objects Studio, which re-

stored the statues' bronze finish and made molds of a broken laurel wreath from one of the statues to create a new bronze wreath.

SAIC offered to recast the wreath in its foundry.

"We took the molds they made and poured foundry wax into them," Murray said. From

there they took a ceramic shell mold, burned out the wax and poured bronze into it to recreate the laurel wreath. "I was part of the spruing, wax finishing and actual casting of the branches."

"This is the first time we've ever cast anything for ourselves," Johnson said. "What it comes down to is that now we've got a pathway to show students all the images and the physical pieces we poured and the sculptures actually installed and give them a whole life cycle what it means to actually do this kind of restoration project."

The project took several weeks. The statues were placed back in position the first week in November.

Murray described the experience, as well as her job, as nothing short of "awesome," especially considering her unusual career path.

"I'd always done musical theater, and by the time I was a senior in high school, I could take more electives. So I started taking drawing and I really fell in love with it," Murray said. "I'd gone to the College of DuPage to get my general education classes out of the way and planned to go to Indiana University for theater. At the last possible moment, I chose to

go to SAIC. I'm very glad I did."

Murray originally majored in drawing and painting, but a class in drawing for sculpture got her hooked. "After that, the next semester all my classes were sculpture. Until I went to SAIC I had never really done sculpture," Murray said.

She earned her BFA in 2013, worked in furniture restoration elsewhere and returned last year as a staffer at SAIC.

"We do a good job teaching students how to use the facilities, how to create in the facilities, and the good ones we don't like to get rid of," Johnson said. "It's always to our benefit to find people like Natalie that can really help us move the different facilities forward and help the next generations of students.

"I like to call what Natalie did 'genre bending,'" Johnson said. "It's mixing things up; not a clear-cut this or that. It really exemplifies what SAIC students do."

As assistant foundry director Murray not only maintains equipment, but she also works closely with an elite group of students who compete to get into the program, doing demos for them and offering lots of insight.

"We're like this little family," Murray said.