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TOP STORY

Love, tree, chainsaw: A story of death and creation in a backyard

By Frank Schultz fschultz@gazettextra.com

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Chainsaw artist Jennifer Ruse of Roadside Saw Works carves away pieces of an old silver maple tree stump as she works Wednesday to create sculptural mushrooms and flowers on what will become a fairy rain garden. Property owner Susan Shotliff had the tree removed a few weeks ago because large branches were continually breaking off when it stormed.

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Thirty years ago, Jennifer Ruse bought a sculpture of a mushroom someone had made with a chainsaw.

She loved that mushroom and figured she could carve her own.

“I can do that,” she would say each day as she passed by her mushroom.

But she didn’t until 2018 when she was between jobs and bored.

Her husband heard her repeat the well-worn brag, and he told her, “Go out and get my saw, and carve a mushroom.”

She didn’t like his saw, so she went to Farm & Fleet and bought her own Husqvarna. A hobby grew into a career.

Ruse had spent the previous 15 years managing a home health agency from a basement office. She was 51 when she carved her first mushroom.



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“If I would’ve done it earlier, I probably would’ve been doing it my whole life,” She said. “But I didn’t. I wasted my life away in an office chair. I could’ve been outside.”

People often ask for eagles or bears, Ruse said, but after talking to the owner of her latest stump, she is carving something new: a fairy rain garden.

The top will feature a big mushroom, flowers, leaves and grooves that will channel rainfall down to a birdbath-sized pool next to a fairy sized house.

Homeowner Sue Shotliff had cherished the big silver maple that hung over the backyard and alley behind 121 Jefferson Ave., where she has lived for the past 20 years.

But the tree was dying, Shotliff said. Every windstorm would tear limbs from it. She feared damage to her neighbor's garage.

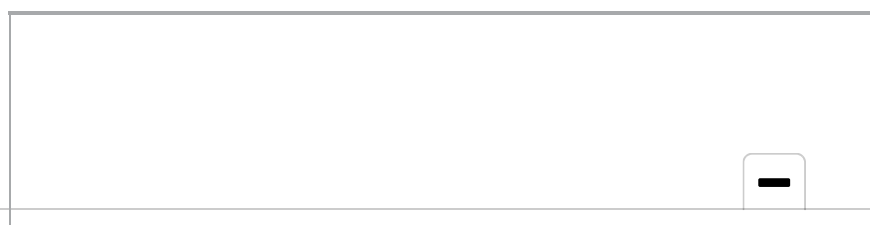
"I know things can't live forever. It kind of broke my heart to know that the tree had to come down," she said.

Workers took most of the tree down, leaving the massive lower trunk, about 12 feet high and 12 feet around.

As Shotliff contemplated taking down the tree, she decided to memorialize it.

She found Ruse's Roadside Saw Works Facebook page last year.

An elementary school art teacher, Shotliff is used to coming up with whimsical ideas for art projects. She suggested fairy houses, and Ruse soon sketched her concept.





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“It’s a real gift to be able to take a big block of something and then remove stuff rather than just building it out of parts and pieces,” Shotliff said. “I think she’s really got a gift.”

Ruse has no formal art training. She first carved mushrooms. Then a friend asked her to do a bear cub.



“I’ll try,” she replied. And she did it.

People would stop by her home in Happy Hollow and ask to buy her mushrooms. Then a neighbor who is a blacksmith offered to show her pieces at the Beloit Farmers Market.

“It just ballooned from there,” she said.

“When COVID hit, I was no longer at the market, so I took up stumps in people’s yards. My tallest one is 20 foot. That was my first time ever on scaffolding.”

She couldn’t tell you exactly how long the carvings will last: “It all depends on the stump and the kind of wood. Every carving is different. Every piece of wood is different. This’ll last their lifetime. We’ll treat it with a deck sealer, so it’ll repel water, and it won’t be shiny, so it won’t crack like varnish would. I suggest my clients do that once a season if not twice.”

Ruse says some people are surprised that a woman would take up chainsaw art. It’s something that gets her creative juices flowing, like singing or writing her family history.

“Sawdust,” she likes to say, “is my glitter.”



This drawing is the inspiration for chainsaw artist Jennifer Ruse's work on an old silver maple tree stump owned by Susan Shotliff.

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Frank Schultz

Reporter - General assignment