

A very special sign

This tree marks a park in memory of a special little girl

By Dan Sawatzky

We put our hearts into every sign we tackle in our shop, but every once in a while a project comes along that demands a whole lot more. A while ago I was contacted by Marian Perrot. Her email read as follows:

“I have been a fan of yours for many years. We own a sign shop, 1st Choice Graphics, in northeast Saskatchewan and work mainly with the farm machinery manufacturing companies in this area. I’m not sure how to make this a

short story but here goes...

“My granddaughter Dayna died in 2005 just shy of her 4th birthday. We spent her last 14 months in and out of hospitals in Saskatoon and Edmonton. Looking back we are grateful for the time we had with her. She taught us so much.

“Dayna’s parents, Amy & Ryan, have created a small park and are looking for a sign. The park will be a gathering place for the kids, with activity stations that are changed occasionally to keep things new and interesting. The pumpkin patch and stone picnic table are already in place and waiting for a sign to

join them in the park.

“They are looking for a sign that pays tribute to their little girl. Something cool—something other little kids would think was cool. This is where you come in. I told them I didn’t think I could do this project justice but I knew who they needed. I gave them some of my back issues of *SignCraft* with your pages marked. They also loved your work but said they didn’t know what to ask for or where to start.

“How does it work from here? I could tell you all about Dayna, how she loved movies and

chicken wings and Laura Secord Super Kid ice cream and ladybugs and....”

My response to Marian was a heartfelt email and included a concept of what I had in mind:

“In reading your story about Dayna, I thought about my own two granddaughters (Phoebe 12 years and Juniper almost two). I thought of all the good times we have shared and about the many things that intrigue them as we explore together. As I designed Dayna’s sign for the park that will bear her name, I wanted to capture the sense of wonder and delight little girls have. They notice and take delight in so many little things, often seeing them for the first time. My granddaughters have taught me to see and appreciate the world around me.

“I created a simple tree with a slightly cartoonish feel to especially appeal to the child in all of us. A dimensional sculpted ladybug—Dayna’s favorite bug—perches on the sign. I would like Dayna’s name on the sign to be in a custom designed font to look like she wrote it.

“The tree needs to be on a hill with bright colored flowers surrounding it. The tree has powder-coated steel leaves and a ladybug for each year Dayna was with you. I envision the tree/sign to be of a scale that does not overpower kids—perhaps about seven feet tall.”

The family loved my first design and suggested a couple small tweaks to make it even more special. A fairy door was tucked into the roots of the tree, and the family’s initials were carved into a hidden spot near the base of the tree. The family forwarded the deposit and we began work in our shop. **SC**



The first drawing I submitted was the tree concept. I drew from my heart, thinking of my own grandchildren as I designed. I sent the drawing, a little apprehensively, desperately wanting to hit a homerun on my first try. I fully understood how important this was for the family. Because the client was a sign maker, I also knew the expectations would be very high.



Dan Sawatzky’s shop, Sawatzky’s Imagination Corporation, www.imaginationcorporation.com, is in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada.



The tree is now wired and ready for concrete. The edges of the sign were textured with a die grinder to extend the woodgrain seamlessly from both sides. This small detail adds a lot of believability.



After the three coats of base color had dried it was time to begin the glazes. As always we started with the lightest glaze. It was brushed on and wiped off carefully. The glaze left in the texture and cracks made these details jump into view.



The leaf shapes were cut from 10 gauge steel plate, bent to shape and then welded to the half-inch steel rod that forms the stem. A little grinding makes everything nice and smooth. Once we were done they were sent out to the powder coaters for the green color.



The family's initials were carved into the base of the tree behind the roots as requested. Details abound on the tree, and are there to be noticed by those who really look. The four ladybugs are the most obvious.



We hand sculpted four ladybugs using Abacadabra Sculpting Epoxy on the tree and sign. Ladybugs were Dayna's favorite and there is one for each year she was with us. Rather than being realistic they are much like a four-year-old would imagine them.



Jeff is busy painting the 5/8-in. rods that support the sign. The sign lettering and the fairy door fade from blue to purple. When I asked Dayna's family about her favorite color they told me it was blue until just before she died. For reasons they do not know, in the last few months she suddenly decided it was purple. The blue/purple fade tells that story.



The many roots of the tree add interest to the feature—and most of the complexity to the project. Welding the armature, tying on the lath, applying the concrete and sculpting it, along with the painting are all much more difficult and time consuming in the back and upside-down areas. The fairy door was done using sculpting epoxy for extra detail.

There's more on SignCraft.com:
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