

LOCAL NEWS

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HOMEROOM HILL-MURRAY SCHOOL



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Artist Pat Benincasa displays one of her St. Joan of Arc medals, made for members of the military after she heard not all U.S. combat troops in Iraq had body armor. Benincasa told one interviewer: "Joan belongs to anyone that is scared and needs courage."

MEDAL OFFERS COURAGE

BY MEGAN BOLDT
Pioneer Press

Pat Benincasa started a painting of St. Joan of Arc three years ago, as the Iraq war was beginning.

It depicted Joan just after she was wounded in the battle of Orleans, leading the charge on her horse to take back the French city. But the St. Paul artist stopped when she was halfway done; she didn't know how to finish it.

As the war continued, Benincasa heard something she found unbelievable — many U.S. troops didn't have the body armor they needed. Earlier this year, it hit her: She would take her image of Joan and emblazon medals with it, and then offer the medals to anyone who wanted to send them to soldiers serving anywhere.

She took \$500 of her own money to make 300 medals and figured that would be it. But

Pat Benincasa's passion and drive prompt her to craft a St. Joan of Arc image to hearten soldiers anywhere they may be.

people learned of her offer within days, and demand surged. To date, she has crafted about 3,000 medals.

"I can't even imagine the life-and-death decisions these soldiers have to make every day. But I want them to know they can feel the weight of Joan. She is right there with them," Benincasa said. "Joan doesn't belong on any side of the political aisle."

Benincasa, an artist-in-residence at the Roman Catholic Hill-Murray School in

Maplewood, spent most of her career as a secular artist. She has paintings and other works in many locations nationwide, including "Falling Water Skylight" above the Minnesota Judicial Center in St. Paul.

It never occurred to her to marry her faith with her art — until after Sept. 11, 2001.

She always had a passion for the saints — whom she calls the "holy troublemakers." The running joke among her friends is, "OK, whose feast day is today?" So Benincasa decided to tell their stories through her paintings and other artwork.

"They did not live in the shadow of fear," she said, "and they didn't live during easy times."

The St. Joan of Arc medal, made of metal alloy with a brass finish, has struck a chord with people from Texas to Australia. Benincasa has received e-mails, phone calls and

ST. JOAN OF ARC MEDAL, 4B

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“Pat put her support for the troops into action and put that personal touch behind it. ... It might sound corny, but it does make a difference to little old me in East Grand Forks.”

Jennifer Modeen, who ordered medals for herself and her husband, a Minnesota National Guard staff sergeant serving in Iraq

St. Joan of Arc medal

(continued)

even personal visits from soldiers and their families.

Benincasa's story has been in Catholic publications and even in an Italian magazine and the French News Service. The French reporter began her interview by asking Benincasa if she knew Joan was the patron saint of France — if she knew that Joan belonged to France.

“I told her Joan belongs to anyone that is scared and needs courage. She belongs to anyone that is frightened,” Benincasa said. “People are just drawn to Joan, whether you're Catholic, agnostic, atheist. It doesn't matter. Joan taps something in us. I think it's her grit, her heart, her endurance.”

East Grand Forks, Minn., resident Jennifer Modeen heard about Benincasa's medals in the spring. She was busy working, finishing her master's degree in social work and taking care of her two children while her husband, Nathan, was in Iraq.

Modeen immediately ordered medals for herself and her husband, a Minnesota National Guard staff sergeant and company master gunner.

Benincasa wouldn't allow Modeen to pay for her husband's medal; soldiers get them for free. She e-mailed and called to make sure the medals found their way to the Modeen home.

It was that personal connection and genuine concern that moved Modeen.

“People always say they don't know what to do or what to say. And the main thing is just to do something. Pat put her support for the troops into action and put that personal



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Pat Benincasa, an artist in residence at Hill-Murray School, has now returned to completing the painting used as the image for her St. Joan of Arc medals. Last week, she was mixing oils in her home studio for the painting, started three years ago. She has paintings and other works in many locations nationwide, including the “Falling Water Skylight” above the Minnesota Judicial Center in St. Paul.

touch behind it. And I think that's amazing,” Modeen said, through tears.

“It might sound corny, but it does make a difference to little old me in East Grand Forks,” she added.

Those who know Benincasa well say it's just in her nature to take on such a project.

Joseph Peschges, president of Hill-Murray, said Benincasa brings energy and her passion for life into the classroom.

“There's very little that she does that surprises me any-

more,” Peschges said. “She's a visionary, and nothing is impossible. You just do it. Her faith is very deep. That ... passion just comes through. It's contagious.”

Archbishop Harry Flynn said Benincasa's medals serve as a simple reminder to soldiers that Joan is there for them during difficult times.

“It's not easy to be away from home. And it's easy to think you've been forgotten,” he said. “But Pat has certainly remembered them all.”

ONLINE

To order a medal or read more about Joan of Arc, visit www.patbenincasa.art.com.

Megan Boldt covers education, including Washington County schools and the North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale school district. She can be reached at mboldt@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5495.