



UP FRONT

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Artwork Inspired by Sago Tragedy

MINN. ARTIST WANTS TO GIVE SCULPTURE AS MEMORIAL TO 12 MINERS WHO DIED IN ACCIDENT

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A few months ago, St. Paul, Minn., artist **Pat Benincasa** was working on a painting when an unseen, unknown force compelled her to start a new project.



Benincasa

The result was a work of art she hopes to give as a memorial to the families left behind after the Jan. 2 Sago mining tragedy.

"I do sacred art — paintings of saints, etc. 'Sacred,' to me is to remember. That's what is sacred," Benincasa said. "This one Friday in September, I was working on a contract piece, a painting. All of a sudden, I decided I had to build this cross.

"I don't know why, but I started taking pieces of wood — really weathered wood — and forming a cross," she said.

As the sculpture started to take shape, Benincasa remembered some old carriage bolts she had saved from another project and started adding them to the artwork.

"When I added the bolts, I just knew what this meant. I knew it was Sago," she said.

"God, I remembered reading about Sago — being told they're OK, and then what really happened," she said, referring to the gut-wrenching miscommunications that led families — and the world, for that matter — to believe all 13 miners who were trapped underground after an explosion had survived.

The families soon learned the truth, however, that **Randal McCloy Jr.** was the lone survivor.

"It just was more than a heart can bear," she said.

Benincasa, an accomplished artist in her area, also is art teacher at a Catholic high school in St. Paul. She said she doesn't



Photo provided by Pat Benincasa

Pat Benincasa, an artist and high school art teacher in St. Paul, Minn., said she created the Sago Cross for Whispered Prayers in memory of the miners who died in the Sago mine tragedy. She wants to give the cross as a memorial to the miners. The cross is 42 inches by 22.5-inches and is made of rusted bolts and dried scrap boards of painted poplar.

know any coal miners. No one in her family is in the coal business. But the Sago tragedy was all she could think about as she made the cross that September day.

"I don't know how West Virginians do it, going into the coal mines every day," she said.

As she recognized Sago as her inspiration, Benincasa went online to read as much as she could about the Sago tragedy.

"I saw that they (the trapped miners) wanted their loved ones to know they prayed and weren't suffering," she said. "That's

when I decided to hand-write those 12 names on the cross."

At first, Benincasa said she wrote the names too delicately.

"Then I thought, 'No, this has to be more significant,' she said. "Each name was a prayer. It was like I could feel them with me."

During what she described as an "incredible four hours," Benincasa covered the entire piece with the names of the 12 miners who died at Sago, each name appearing as many times as it would fit.

"It took me two or three days



"I don't know how West Virginians do it, going into the coal mines every day."

— Pat Benincasa

to recover from this. It was just an intense experience. I told my students about it," she said. "I'm not one of those new-age-type people. I'm not. But I take my work seriously. It's about remembering those who have passed ... to feel the breath of God in everyone."

Benincasa said the completed cross, which she named Sago Cross for Whispered Prayers, should go to West Virginia as a memorial to the miners.

"This is not mine to keep. I don't want any money for it," she said. "I just don't know how to go about doing this."

Benincasa contacted The State Journal, which in turn left messages with **Wease Day**, pastor at **Sago Baptist Church** — where the families had their vigil during the 44-hour ordeal in January. In a returned message, Day said he would like to learn more about the artwork and would help in any way he could. At press time, The State Journal had not yet been able to speak with Day directly.