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Community art: Flag symbolizes men's love of country



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ANNA MARIE LUX
Sunday, December 4, 2016



ANGELA MAJOR

Edgerton artist Nancy Platner painted the American flag mural on the side of Whiskey Ranch, at the corner of Wall and Main streets in downtown Janesville. She estimates she spent 84 hours on the project in July and August.

JANESVILLE—Benny Useni and Ilir Banushi are often confused as brothers.

Maybe because they are business partners, have the same deep-rooted work ethic and are family through marriage.

They also trace their heritage to the same region in Macedonia in the Balkans.

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In addition, they both knew what they wanted on the north wall of Whiskey Ranch when they opened the bar and grill on Janesville's Main Street two years ago.

“We saw the U.S. flag up there from day one,” Useni said. “It was just a matter of time and finding the right person to paint it.”

Today, a 15-foot-high and 60-foot-long ensign appears to be rippling in the wind at the southeast corner of Main and Wall streets.

Banushi and Useni commissioned Edgerton artist Nancy Platner to paint the flag, which they say symbolizes their pride in the United States.

“We respect our country, our vets, our freedom, our democracy,” Useni said. “We respect everything about our country. Why would you put anything else on that wall?”

Banushi agrees.

“We put it there out of love of country,” he said. “Every time I come to work, the flag reminds me we are glad to be in Janesville.”

Both Useni and Banushi were born in the United States, but they grew up in bilingual households.

Their parents and grandparents were born in Macedonia.

Useni and Banushi have visited the southeastern European country and returned to the United States with new eyes.

“It's hard to understand how good we have it until you see other places,” Useni said. “I appreciate my home much more after my visits.”

The men grew up in the restaurant business and watched their parents move up in the industry.

“Our parents made sacrifices,” Banushi said.

“They went from assistant cooks to line chefs to owners,” Useni said. “They never settled for one position. We watched them work



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very hard. We watched them make futures for themselves.”

Useni and Banushi proudly follow in their footsteps.

In addition to co-owning Whiskey Ranch in Janesville, they co-own Whiskey Ranch in Delavan.

Banushi and his wife, Merlina, also have restaurants and bars in Stoughton and Edgerton. His brother, Urim, runs the Edgerton businesses. His first cousin, Al Ibria, is general manager of Janesville's Whiskey Ranch.

“I enjoy waking up in the morning and going to work,” Banushi said. “I love my job. We both enjoy challenges.”

Useni and his wife, Jeta, also own the popular Citrus Café on Janesville's Main Street.

“We want to say thank you to the community for supporting all our business ventures,” Useni said. “The community has been friendly to us since the start. There are many restaurants they can go to, but they choose our restaurants.”

The men see the flag as a gift to the community.

Platner, the artist, said area residents seemed pleased with her work.

“I had people rolling down their car windows and telling me how great it was,” she said. “Every day people had positive things to say. It was such an uplifting experience.”

Platner worked 84 hours on the project from July to late August.

She describes herself as a chalkboard and paint artist. The flag was her first mural on a grand scale, but she did not hesitate to take on the project.

“The challenging part was getting the dimensions right,” Platner said. “When you look at it 6 inches from your face, it looks much different than when you look at it from 12 feet away on the street.”

First, she drew the flag on a small scale. Then she drew a grid on

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the wall with chalk and made a stencil for the eight stars so they would all be the same size.

She could not paint all 50 stars because the space was too small.

“To keep the flag big, I could only put a portion of it on the wall,” Platner said.

To get solid colors on porous bricks, she used several coats of house paint.

Platner's other work includes chalkboards for weddings, holiday decorations and window paintings.

“My work makes people happy,” she said. “I put joy into the world one picture at a time.”



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