

Local artist to use \$10,000 grant to promote silk, mulberry trees

By EJ Conzola II

A Whitehall artist has received a \$10,000 state grant to create a project that will reflect the community's history in the silk trade.

The project was inspired by the discovery of white mulberry trees after Serena Kovalosky allowed a portion of her yard to return to the wild. The trees had apparently lain dormant under a blanket of lawn for around 60 years before emerging last spring, she said.

White mulberry trees are not native to the United States but they were important to the silk industry at the turn of the 20th century, as their leaves provide food for silkworms, Kovalosky explained. At that time, Whitehall was home to the Champlain Silk Mill, which processed the raw silk fibers from the cocoons of the silk moth into fabric, and Kovalosky's property was at one time owned by the silk mill.



Some American silk mills raised their own silkworms to avoid having to buy the raw silk threads from China, Japan or other silk producers.

The Rural & Traditional Arts Fellowship grant, which is administered by the Arts Council for Wyoming County in partnership with the New York State Council on the Arts, will enable Kovalosky to create two works of art inspired by the white mulberry discovery.

“One will incorporate foraged parts of the tree in a traditional wildcrafted piece and the other will be a contemporary sculpture that will reflect the tree's provenance, its use in the silk trade, and how its presence is an archaeological study of the history of Whitehall,” she said.

Another part of the project will include an online “Story-Box” that will incorporate text and images to tell the story behind the artwork and show how it was created, she added.

Kovalosky is currently researching the project (and waiting for the mulberry trees to re-emerge from their winter slumber), with plans to hold a public showing of the completed work in late August. She said she hopes the work will attract not only those interested in the arts but also anyone interested in learning more about a largely forgotten aspect of Whitehall's history.

The mill was destroyed by fire in the 1960s after having sat vacant for many years.

She said she also hopes it encourages people to look more closely at what is immediately around them and see “what kind of stories are beneath your feet.”

The fellowship program was created specifically to promote artists working in the more rural areas of the state, she said. Much of the state's arts scene – and its accompanying funding – seems to be centered in more urban areas, and the program, which is in its first year, is focused on artists in rural communities and the stories they can tell, she said.

“This puts us up front,” she said.

Kovalosky was one of 10 artists across the state to receive the funding, which was made possible with support from the New York State Council on the Arts with support from the governor's office and the New York State Legislature.

“It is a great honor to be among the talented artists selected for this fellowship,” said Kovalosky. “Artists in rural regions often have greater challenges in terms of recognition and opportunities, especially those who work in the traditional arts. I am thrilled that this fellowship will address these challenges, increase our visibility, establish the importance of our role within our communities and increase appreciation for the traditional arts.”

Kovalosky grew up in Whitehall but left in the 1970s when it seemed “opportunities abounded elsewhere.” She worked in the travel industry and lived in Boston and Montreal, as well as France, before returning home to assist her elderly mother. She also devoted herself full time to her art.

“Whitehall is really nice place to create,” she said, that “brought my art into some fabulous places.” Her art took on a “more rural, nature-inspired aspect” in part because of a sense of peace from her reconnection with her roots and with nature and she found herself “creating from that peace,” she said.

The white mulberry project is part of a larger part multidisciplinary Eco-Garden Project combining plants, art, science, history and humanity, she said.

Kovalosky described her art as “rooted in the organic form and natural materials and explores the interconnectivity of the natural world and our place within it.”

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