

North St. Paul and the World's Most Famous SNOWman



Photo by
Sue Hartley

Epiphanies—those brief, life-altering moments of revelation—are not the exclusive property of the spiritually advanced or the religiously devout. For every case of a holy man like the Apostle Paul, whose life was utterly transformed by the divine encounter on the Road to Damascus, there's a Lloyd Koesling.

Koesling, who died in 2002, was a barber and, later in life, the operator of a go-kart track and mini-golf park in North St. Paul. An upstanding citizen, a civic booster, and a strong family man, Koesling experienced his epiphany on a trip to Disneyland.

As Carol Koesling tells it, her husband was impressed by the towering man-made constructions at the Anaheim, California, theme park. From Tom Sawyer's Island to the Matterhorn, nothing was what it seemed to be. The genius of Disney was to improve upon the natural state. Whatever might burn or crumble—or melt—in real life was reconstructed in plastic, stucco, and concrete. The raw materials of the real world had been excluded altogether; what was left had been molded, welded, and painted until it was reborn a perfect imitation.

Standing amid the looming synthetic creations, Koesling knew that here was an idea he could bring home to North St. Paul. And he knew just where his vision was needed most.

Labor-saving and sun-defying: a community builds a mascot

Since the early 1950s, the local business organizations had sponsored an annual "Snow Frolic." The midwinter event combined a display of civic pride with old-fashioned fun. Its mascot was a mammoth snowman constructed by local volunteers. According to the centennial history of the city, *A Century of Good Living—North St. Paul* by Rosemary Palmer (North St. Paul Centennial Commission, 1987), the snowman was dubbed the official symbol of the community in 1964. Snow was trucked in from the surrounding area, and brawny civic boosters put in hours of labor, all in service of North St. Paul's aspiration to become known as the site of the World's Biggest Snowman.

Alas, the Minnesota climate being what it is, what goes up in January inevitably melts come spring. And the town's source of civic pride came with an annual renewal notice. Not only were the city fathers asking for substantial contributions of snow-packing muscle, but they were asking for it year after year.

And then Koesling stepped forward with his Disney-inspired vision: why not make the giant snowman a permanent symbol of the community?

It was 1971, and in North St. Paul, snowman construction had just entered the modern age. Koesling drew up plans for a stucco-and-steel snowman that would withstand the ravages of winter—and summer. The City Council donated land at the corner of Seventh and Margaret streets to give the snowman a place to stand downtown. Junior Chamber of Commerce members raised \$2,000 to cover supplies. Volunteers came forward to construct the sculpture. A firm of consulting engineers, Johnson-Sahlman, Inc., analyzed the plans and proposed modifications



Photo by Sue Hartley

to stiffen the snowman's spine. Thin, barely legible wax-paper copies of the engineers' plans can still be found among Carol Koesling's souvenirs.

A smile to silence all complaints

Like many other men of vision, Koesling encountered naysayers. His widow remembers letters in the local newspaper wondering, "When are they going to finish that eyesore behind the bank?" One City Council member was even reported to have threatened to have the half-finished structure bulldozed if the creators didn't hurry up.

And then, on July 23, 1974, a volunteer crane operator finally settled the snowman's jovial head upon the massive shoulders. Koesling climbed inside the structure to help maneuver the head so that the snowman's nose was directly above the buttons marching down the barrel chest. An amateur artist, he had already painted on the figure's beaming smile. After that triumphant day, Carol Koesling says, "There were no more complaints."

The snowman stands 44 feet high and weighs about 20 tons. Its welded steel frame supports a body made of sand and stucco. It takes about 25 gallons of white paint to give the snowman his high-gloss surface, though never at public expense. Mary Mills of the North St. Paul City Manager's Office notes that there is no line item for the snowman in the city budget, and that local volunteers have always handled routine maintenance.

If Koesling hoped the snowman would come to symbolize North St. Paul, he exceeded his own expectations. The snowman silhouette is found everywhere, from the street signs to the weathervane atop City Hall to the logo on the official residents' guide. Visit the city's website and you'll find a picture of the snowman. Visit the mayor and you're likely to receive one of the special snowman-shaped pins that he keeps to hand out to guests. From www.worldslargestthings.com to www.roadsideamerica.com, the snowman has made his mark online at Internet sites devoted to the curious byways of American travel. The snowman has also carved out a place for himself in the guidebooks and in the consciousness of people from all around the Twin Cities area.

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Twenty tons of stucco and steel is sent packing—again

After his relocation in 1990 from downtown North St. Paul to the current site next to the freeway, the snowman became even better known. Ask anyone who's driven Highway 36 from St. Paul to the Wisconsin border. The traveler may not remember anything else about the trip, but the image of the giant snowman smiling genially down on the passing scene from his post by the Margaret Street turnoff tends to stick.



1995 Snow Follies week, with St Paul Winter Carnival Royalty

photos by Ellsworth Erickson

As it happens, the snowman may soon be on the move once more. Plans to create a bridge over Highway 36, to reconnect the two halves of the city at Margaret Street, will likely send the snowman packing. If that happens, says Paul Anderson, president of the North St. Paul Historical Society, "We're sure that the snowman will be relocated again somewhere."

After all, what would North St. Paul be without the World's Most Famous Snowman?

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North St. Paul Snowman
Margaret Street and Highway 36
North St. Paul

Sculptor's Quest BECOMES Eagan's Success: CAPONI ART PARK & LEARNING CENTER

Caponi Art Park and Learning Center is fashioned from the personal vision and philosophy of its namesake, Anthony Caponi.

Caponi built his home in 1950 in Eagan, then only a village south of St. Paul. Today, Eagan's 34 square miles of rolling hills, woods, oak savannah, and wetlands are home to 67,000 residents. A sculptor and professor of art for 42 years at Macalester College, Caponi eventually owned 83 acres. In 1972, he sold 20 acres to Eagan with the stipulation that they be maintained as open space, thwarting the city's plan to use the land for a golf course. The remaining 63 acres are now home to the Caponi family as well as a sculpture park that features walking trails and a community center used for performances, gatherings, and classes.

Personal vision, private amenity—open to all

A native of Italy, Caponi hoped to realize a place of great beauty—the synthesis of creativity and nature. To this end, he put an immense amount of personal labor into the park, forging roads and shaping the land according to

his sculptural and aesthetic sense. Caponi even persuaded the city to provide an underpass under Diffley Road, connecting the park's two segments. He started taking his students to the park, and soon the number of visitors grew.

Wanting to maintain the property as open space for art, Caponi approached the City of Eagan numerous times to see if it would be willing to help manage this vision. Ultimately, however, he refused to compromise with the needs of city planners, who saw the land as prime real estate for recreational space, tot lots, and

similar development. By the late 1970s, Caponi had backed off from negotiations with Eagan and Dakota County because, thanks to the public money such a partnership would have entailed, his art park would have faced unwanted restrictions on its operations and maintenance.



In addition to featuring conventional sculptures, the park itself is being sculpted



Detail of "Pompeii," a series of bronze relief panels 70 feet long

The crux became this: when land is worth approximately \$100,000 per acre, how can a private individual be adequately reimbursed for his investment by cash-strapped governments trying to take responsibility for a project that's open to the public? More important, how can a private vision, money aside, be maintained?

Furthermore, can the wishes and intent of a creator align with the demands and requirements of public support and, perhaps, control?

The changing nature of suburban interests: a 20-year saga

In the early 1990s, city government geared up to partner with Caponi to own and preserve the land, and both the land and the art were appraised. But the city backed off. According to Tom Hedges, city manager of Eagan since 1976, "The City Council and the City Parks Commission weren't willing to buy the land and the art at that time. Maybe the right questions weren't asked."

By the mid-1990s city and county officials were increasingly aware of the importance of Caponi's vision and the cultural and monetary value of his land. "They endorsed it and encouraged it, even to potential funding sources," Hedges explains. "But they themselves didn't have the dollars to support the venture."

In 1996, the city identified in a referendum 20 parcels of land to preserve as open space, Caponi Art Park among them. The referendum failed.

"Eagan was in its adolescent phase," Hedges says. "Passive land wasn't as high on the Richter scale as it is today. [Now] the interest of Eagan's residents is changing—the age of the residents is increasing, [and] land for passive recreation use such as art parks and nature centers is becoming more desirable."

Creative solutions win the day

By the decade's end, Dakota County did an about-face on land preservation, and a \$20-million referendum passed. After prospective financial partners, such as Macalester College, backed out, the city and the county put \$720,000 and \$800,000, respectively, toward the purchase of all 60 acres of Caponi Art Park. The conditions included the continuation of cultural programming and a firm restriction on commercial and residential development on the land.

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School children gather around "A walk in outer space," stainless steel and 18-10 steel photo courtesy of Caponi Art Park

At last, Caponi Art Park's time had come. Realizing the significance of maintaining the park, the City of Eagan and Dakota County evolved into

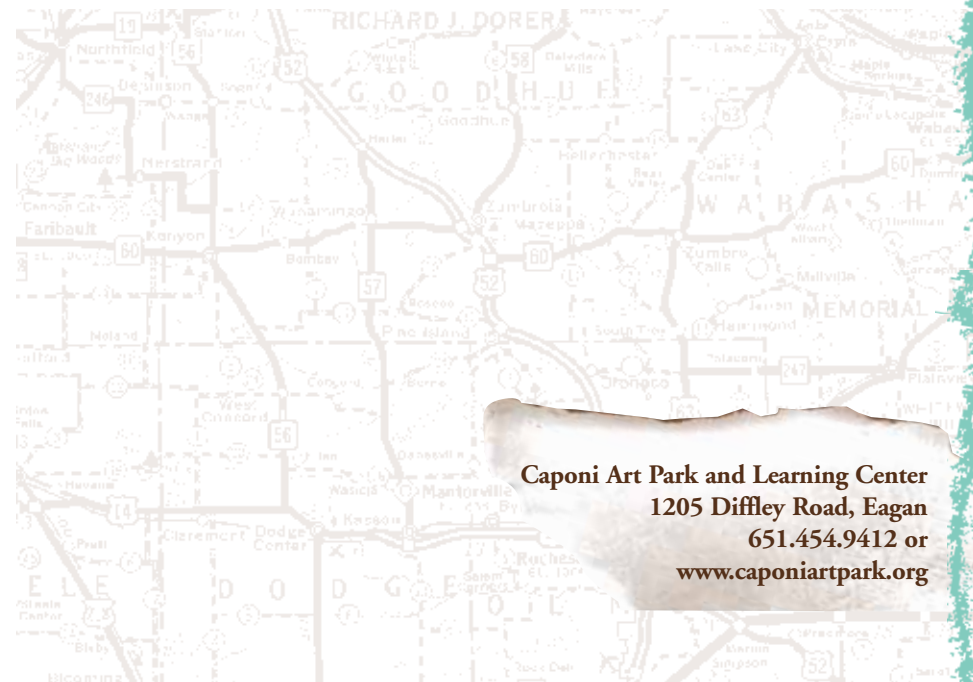
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Because the city could not afford to run Caponi Art Park, a nonprofit corporation was formed in 1992 to develop it as a local and regional cultural resource, with a foundation board to direct the process of land acquisition and to oversee management. Board members are from the city and Dakota County, the Caponi family, and business leaders. The Trust for Public Land and The McKnight Foundation have supplied counsel and support.

The sale agreement reflects a commitment on all sides. In early 2005, the city and county purchased 30 acres outright through deed and mortgage. Caponi donated 10 acres. The art park foundation will purchase the remaining 20 acres from the proceeds of its capital campaign. Its board of directors will oversee the administrative piece, and the city will take care of park maintenance. Anthony Caponi will be the park's artistic director, managing all aesthetic, exhibition, and programmatic issues. And his vision will carry securely forward.

After nearly 50 years, a creative solution won the day. "No one can make something else out of it," Caponi says. "The philosophy and goals of the park will not change."

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Caponi Art Park and Learning Center
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