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Hero K-9 military dog honored with statue being sculpted by Salt Lake City artist

By Alex Cabrero, KSL-TV | Posted - Jan. 1, 2023 at 10:28 p.m.



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10PM: Hero K-9 military dog honored with statue being sculpted by Salt Lake City artist
KSL TV

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SALT LAKE CITY — There is something to be said about an artist who obsesses over every little detail.

Lena Toritch has sculpted several dogs in her career inside her Salt Lake City studio, but Layka is about as special as any she has done before.

"This statue has to be done perfectly," Toritch said. "Layka is a Ranger dog. She is a hero dog. She has saved many lives."

Layka was a military K-9 in Afghanistan with the U.S. Army Rangers. During a mission in 2013, she went into a house where someone was shooting at U.S. soldiers. Layka took that person down, but not before she was shot four times. Her injuries cost Layka her front leg.

"The wound was so bad they had to cut it off," Toritch said.

Layka survived and was awarded the Purple Heart. She also became the first dog since World War II to be awarded the Medal of Heroism.

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Layka is also credited with being the inspiration behind the 2022 movie "Dog" starring Channing Tatum. It is why Toritch feels the responsibility of getting every feature just right.

"This particular statue will be based on the iconic photo of the National Geographic issue," Toritch said. "Everybody knows National Geographic. Even for those people who never saw the military dog, they know this picture."

Layka was on the cover of National Geographic for a 2014 story about Hero Dogs. That picture, and several others, is what Toritch is going off to mold the clay into shape and then carve perfect lines.

Alex Cabrero @KSL_AlexCabrero · Dec 31, 2022
Layka earned a Purple Heart, the Medal of Heroism (1st dog since WWII), was on the cover of National Geographic, and was the inspiration behind the 2022 movie "Dog." Now she's getting a statue. The artist sculpting it is based in Salt Lake City. This story tonight on @KSL5TV at 9

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It also helps Toritch to talk to the statue.

"Well, that's my secret. And they talk back," she said with a laugh.

The statue will eventually sit at the 1st Ranger Battalion Heritage Center at Hunter Army Air Field in Savannah, Georgia.

The idea behind the project came from Teri Wise, who lives in Texas, and is helping the Sua Sponte Foundation raise money for the new Heritage Center.

Wise has worked with the U.S. Army Ranger community for the past 10 years and helped to raise about a quarter-million dollars for several Ranger campaigns. When she heard about Layka's story, she started raising money for her statue.

"I have several family and friends in the military, and this is my way to give back," Wise said.

When it was time to select an artist for Layka's statue, Wise knew of Toritch's work from another war dog project they worked on together.

"Her work is really amazing," she said. "From the pictures I have seen, she has done a great job honoring Layka."

Toritch has been working on the statue since September.

She said she is working faster than she normally does on a piece because Layka, who was adopted by her Ranger handler, is 11 years old now and could be at the unveiling if everything works out.

"I want to meet her in person. She is my inspiration," Toritch said.

The statue will help tell Layka's story for generations.

"That's the reward," Toritch said. "Many years from now, especially children will come and start touching and looking at reading the name."

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