



# A Little Fate, A Lot of Clay

Savannah is home to nationally renowned sculptor Susie Chisholm, who creates lifelike sculptures of special people.

*Written and photographed by* LESLIE MOSES

**YOU'VE PROBABLY SEEN** the statue “The Runner,” memorializing athlete and community advocate Julie Backus Smith, at Lake Mayer Park’s entrance. You may not know, though, much about the artist behind it: Savannah’s own Susie Chisholm.

Chisholm, primarily a portrait sculptor, is one of only two National Sculpture Society fellows from Georgia, and one of only 112 nationwide. The waitlist for Chisholm to make a piece runs about five years, and each sculpture, made in bronze and weighing up to 500 pounds, takes around a year to create.

Chisholm’s statues can be found around the nation. She has three in Summerville, South Carolina, alone. In addition to “The Runner,” in Savannah, her sculptures include depictions of Gunnery Sgt. Roy Strickland at Hospice Savannah; Maj. Gen. Frederick L. Anderson Jr. at the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum, Robert Demere at Islands YMCA, and Johnny Mercer in Ellis Square. Her smaller local pieces have appeared in local galleries such as Reynolds Square Fine Art Gallery and at Four Corners Fine Art and Framing in Bluffton, South Carolina, and have sold to people around the world, including in England and Australia.

Did she envision doing such work in her early days of sculpting in the late 1990s? “Absolutely not,” Chisholm says. In fact, if it weren’t for an ad in the *Savannah Morning News*, she might never have become a sculptor. But Chisholm believes in fate.

Although her sculpting career began when she was at midlife, Chisholm’s early life did have echoes of her future destiny. As a girl visiting the New York World’s Fair in 1964, Chisholm was mesmerized by a visiting piece, Michelangelo’s famous marble Pietà, which is now in St. Peter’s Basilica. Young Chisholm returned to stand in front of the sculpture again and again. “I was just absolutely fascinated with it,” she says. Her parents, a homemaker mom and a detail-loving architect father, didn’t discourage her from a life in art.

She earned a degree in graphic design from the University of Georgia and designed everything from bags of cat food to billboards. She even created a mouth exhibit for children to walk into, called “You are What You Eat,” for Savannah’s former science museum on Paulsen Street (that museum closed in 1998).

But one day, at age 45, Chisholm spotted that newspaper ad about a sculpting class being conducted by the City of Savannah, and the rest is history. After the sculpting class, Chisholm checked out all 23 books on sculpting from the Bull Street Library and read every single one during a car trip on vacation with her husband, Billy.

She thinks that if she had taken that first class in her 20s as opposed to her 40s, she wouldn’t have plunged into the discipline. But by then, her three children were older, and she was ready. “I totally jumped into this, both feet,” she says. »

# Start your year with a spark



Permanent jewelry for your *moments*,  
your *people*, your celebrations!  
In studio or on-site for  
parties and corporate  
events. And with  
Valentine's Day  
around the corner,  
it's the perfect time  
to link up with  
someone you love.



912.581.2111 | [goldielinkssav.com](http://goldielinkssav.com)

## ARTS



Chisholm works on commission, often doing life-size pieces — or sometimes “life and a half” size figures — and always starting in clay and finishing in bronze. Her upstairs studio is nearly surrounded with clay pieces that her calico cat Zoey sometimes “helps” sculpt. Chisholm just lightheartedly repairs it.

She starts with a tabletop-sized piece of clay to work out the details. Will the smiling boy with outstretched arms for a children’s hospital stand on a ladder? How high? What direction should he face? Will he wear a cape? Then she makes every piece nude to get fixed points like wrists and elbows right. Then there’s Chisholm’s favorite part: dressing a piece. Details of buttons or the flow of fabric wrinkles are not toilsome to her. “It’s fun to me,” she says. All the while she’s “tooling” the oil-based clay with a utensil that looks like a stick with a small lasso on one end. It has barely visible “teeth” in the lasso part.

She’ll spend six months to a year working on a piece in clay before it goes to an Atlanta foundry, which casts the clay sculpture into bronze. The process from clay to bronze follows a series of molds, and eventually bronze is heated to 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit and poured into a ceramic shell mold. Then that mold is removed when the bronze cools, and the bronze color is perfected.

Chisholm researches her subjects deeply, reading any book available on the person she will be creating a sculpture of, interviewing relatives and friends, and studying photos and items associated with the person. “You have to put a personality in there,” she says. When Chisholm made Revolutionary War hero Gen. Nathanael Greene, for example, she paid a Greene reenactor to fly roundtrip to Savannah and serve as a model because he had the proper uniform.

Relatives of people she’s sculpting understand her level of research and empathy. One woman cried seeing her dad’s likeness in clay in Chisholm’s studio. The person represented is often deceased, and yet in a way, the sculptures almost become friends to Chisholm, who has been known to hug the final product. “I know them,” she says, simply. **S**