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Lt. Cmdr. Don Taylor, right, and Preston Cruse, of the Paducah Tilghman Navy Junior ROTC, look on at the unveiling of the second in the Quilt City USA Murals project—a recreation of Melinda Bula’s “...and Our Flag was Still There!” by local painter Stefanie Graves.

DEREK OPERLE | The Sun

A war-torn flag flies frozen in the colorful fog of war.

This patriotic image — a recreation of California quilter Melinda Bula’s “... and Our Flag was Still There!” — was the focus as a small crowd gathered outside the Paducah-McCracken County Convention & Expo Center to see the unveiling of the second piece in the Quilt City USA Mural project and celebrate Veterans Day Wednesday.

Gayle Kaler, former Paducah mayor and chair of Paducah Quilt Murals Inc., began the proceedings. She spoke about Bula and the motivation behind her quilt.

“Patriotism is the common thread that defines (her) quilt ... (it) helped her through the fear of her son being deployed in the Middle East, a United States Marine, in a time of war 10 years ago,” Kaler said. “She prayed over every piece of that quilt before she stitched it that her son would be safe, so this quilt is dedicated to all the veterans that have served in our wars.

“Many of them have paid the ultimate price and we want to thank them today.”

Kentucky State Sen. Danny Carroll was on hand for the unveiling and gave some brief remarks in recognition of the project and of Veterans Day.

“Over recent months our flag has been disrespected time after time, and I cannot begin to tell you how encouraging it is to see a group come together to show proper respect not only to the flag but to our veterans,” Carroll said. “Were it not for (them) and (their) sacrifices, we wouldn’t be here today and we wouldn’t be able to have the protests that we have seen over recent months.”

Addressing the veterans in attendance, Carroll said: “You are the reason that we’re here today. Know that, that is appreciated by all of us.”

Stefanie Graves, a local painter, recreated the quilt on panels of Pellon, a lightweight material used to stabilize quilts for display which was then mounted on the portion of the Paducah floodwall facing the convention center.

During the 900 hours spent translating Bula’s work from thread to paint, Graves formed a deep connection with the piece.

“... and Our Flag was Still There!’ is a line from our ‘Star Spangled Banner’ that reminds us of our first struggles in forming our democracy. Melinda Bula’s image brilliantly captures that moment with a tattered American flag still rippling in the aftermath of battle, even as smoke and fire surround it,” she said to those in attendance. “It is torn but it defiantly remains aloft. Working on this mural made me think of not only that initial struggle but also our many other struggles in preserving our democracy ... that our country has survived.”

With the recent political turmoil in the country, the work gave Graves hope with its reminder of “our internal strength as a nation and our unwavering faith in our democracy” and as well as those who have fought for it.

“The mural and quilt are also a reminder that art is more than just pretty pictures. In art’s most powerful sense it serves to inspire us, to make us question and reflect on issues in a way that words cannot convey,” Graves said. “I am so proud to be a part of a community that celebrates that tradition and honored to bring to life an image that is the epitome of the arts’ greatest purpose.”

The first mural in the series — a recreation of Caryl Bryer Fallert-Gentry’s “Corona II: Solar Eclipse” by Char Downs — was unveiled in 2017. All funding for the Quilt City USA Murals project comes from private donations. Former Sun reporter Pat Brockenborough contributed \$20,000 to sponsor the recreation of Bula’s work.

More information about the series and ways to donate to the project can be found at www.paducahquiltmurals.org.

Bula’s quilt was selected for inclusion in the project by a committee headed by Bonnie Browning, the executive show director for the American Quilter’s Society, due to its historical importance.

“From the early days, quiltmakers have included the American flag in their needlework,” Browning said in a release. “Melinda Bula made this quilt when her only son became a United States Marine. She dedicated it to all military families who have raised sons and daughters who sacrifice to keep us free.”