

[https://gazette.com/news/plan-moves-forward-to-erect-statue-of-cotton-club-owner/article\\_8e0c8a68-74f5-11e8-93b5-5fd4b4e93180.html](https://gazette.com/news/plan-moves-forward-to-erect-statue-of-cotton-club-owner/article_8e0c8a68-74f5-11e8-93b5-5fd4b4e93180.html)

# Plan moves forward to erect statue of Cotton Club owner Fannie Mae Duncan at Pikes Peak Center

By: Rachel Riley Jun 21, 2018



A bronze tribute to a beloved local African-American entrepreneur will greet visitors next year a block from where her legendary downtown Colorado Springs nightclub once stood.

The sculpture of Fannie Mae Duncan, whose Cotton Club on West Colorado Avenue was the first business in the then segregated city to permit patrons of all races, w

designed and sculpted by a Fort Collins-based artist and placed in front of the Pikes Peak Center late next summer or early fall.

On Wednesday, sculptor Lori Kiplinger Pandy signed a \$100,000 agreement to create the statue, which will be paid for by donations. About 50 people gathered to watch the signing at Centennial Hall near where the statue will stand.

Kay Esmiol, chairwoman of the committee behind the project, said at the event that the statue will not only be the first in the Pikes Peak region to honor a black female but also the first to honor any woman.

Duncan's club, which opened in the 1950s and bustled with life during the divisive Civil Rights era, offered famous black musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and B.B. King a place to play and stay when The Broadmoor and The Antlers hotels only allowed white performers.

The club was known for the black-and-white sign that Duncan placed in the window which read: "EVERYBODY WELCOME."

Esmiol, who wrote a Duncan biography before the influential businesswoman died in 2005, said that sentiment is still relevant today.

"To unite people through a mutual love of the arts is a message that's timeless," Esmiol told The Gazette.

The idea to honor Duncan with a statue came from a group of students that Esmi mentored while working as an English teacher at Eagleview Middle School in the 1990s, she said. The students chose Duncan as the subject for a play, starring minorities, and wrote and performed her story.

Esmiol presented the plan for the sculpture last August to El Paso County commissioners, who gave the statue steering committee the go-ahead to proceed

“When I heard about the statue, it brought tears,” said Duncan’s niece Claudean Bragg-Brooks, who was at the signing.

Bragg-Brooks, 78, who lives in Colorado Springs, said she remembers Duncan for wisdom she imparted and for the sound of her laugh. She recalled working behind concessions counter just inside the club’s doorway as a teenager, saying, “We like dance.”

Black soldiers, Colorado College students and wealthy white socialites mixed at the club at Sahwatch Street and West Colorado Avenue.

“If anybody in here is participating in business, you know that when you’re creating something sometimes comes with controversy,” Darryl Glenn, president of the Board of County Commissioners, said at the signing. “But she was able to stand up and make a difference. And she won that fight.”



The only boot you'll need this fall.

*Thursday Boots*

Irving “Dad” Bruce, police chief at the time, allowed her to serve anyone 21 or over

Facing pressure from white business owners who were losing money to Duncan's enterprise, he originally told her that she could cater only to black customers. Although he changed his mind, her response became one of her most notable quotes: "I check 'em for age. I didn't know I had to check 'em for color."

During urban renewal efforts in the 1970s, the club was lost when city officials bought two of the buildings she owned, despite her objections.

But downtown remains a center for art and culture, Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum Director Matt Mayberry said in addressing the small crowd at the signing.

"We want art that truly represents our sense of place and our diversity," he said. "This sculpture of Fannie Mae Duncan should be a mirror that reflects all of us. This sculpture will help to do just that."

Pandy, who will be sharing the sculpting process on a blog available at [KiplingerPandy.com](http://KiplingerPandy.com), specializes in bronze, ceramic and cast stone sculptures of people and wildlife.

The statue steering committee has raised \$59,000 so far, Esmiol said. With transportation and installation, the cost of the project will exceed \$100,000, she said.

Donations can be mailed to The FMD Sculpture Project, Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum, 215 S. Tejon St., Colorado Springs, CO 80903. Checks should be made to "Pioneers Museum/FMD Statue." For more information, email Esmiol at [kesmiol@q.com](mailto:kesmiol@q.com).

---

Rachel Riley

County Government Reporter