

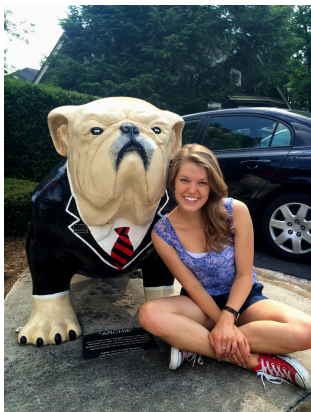
Feature Story

Bulldog Statues in Athens, GA

Robin Hargett

In the heart of Athens, GA, well-known statues cover the city. These are not just normal statues, they are 4-foot-tall fiberglass figures in the shape of bulldogs. These infamous bulldogs are deeply loved and appreciated in Athens and have become intertwined in the city's culture and traditions. However, most people are unaware of the backstory behind how these beloved dogs came to be. The nearly 50 bulldog statues are a testament to local university pride and support of a severely underserved community.

The origins of these statues date back to the early 2000s, when two members of the Athens-Oconee Junior Woman's Club, Linda Ford and Julie Walters, spearheaded the project. Inspired by the charity event "Cow Parade" in New York City and Chicago, these two young women had a dream of raising money to support AIDS research. The project, "We Let the Dogs Out", officially began in 2002.



The main idea behind these dogs was to design and paint them with unique features and themes, then auction them off to raise the money. Linda Ford set the bar fairly low, only intending to sell around 12 bulldog statues. However, the event far exceeded her expectations, as nearly 50 statues were sold and about \$25,000 was raised by 2010 for the charitable cause.

By 2003, these statues began appearing in several locations across the city. Very quickly, the bulldogs became a popular tourist attraction that many people adored. Each bulldog statue around Athens has its own name and unique theme. For instance, Dawg Walker, placed in the Wray-Nicholson house, is a tribute to Georgia Football legend Herschel Walker. Biotest Dawg, placed outside of the Biotest Plasma Center, is painted in large DNA spirals to attract people to the business.

Celeste, the bulldog in front of the Georgia Center, tells a classic story of University of Georgia football. The statue features paintings of a red and black football helmet and jersey (similar to the ones the football players wear) and championship rings from the 2021 and 2022 National Championship wins. She also has a bone-shaped suitcase to accompany her, furthering its relation to the hotel.

Linda Ford's intentions for these bulldogs were motivated by several different aspects. She has a great appreciation for art, and wanted to make pieces like these to not only share that appreciation she has with other people, but to tell a story of each unique piece of Athens. In return, she was able to take the profits from the statues and donate it all to AIDS research, which had a great impact on continuing efforts to find a cure for HIV/AIDS. Funds also went to local testing centers, support services and outreach programs for those living with HIV.

Even to this day, the impact these statues had on AIDS research continues to be felt. The statues not only raised a significant amount of money for the cause, but they also helped create a greater sense of community in Athens. They aided in bringing a community of people together to support those who were suffering and to help find a cure for a terrible disease.

As Athens continues to grow, the love for the bulldog statues does too. The fiberglass figures serve much more of a purpose than just visual enjoyment and a perfect photo opportunity. They are beacons of hope in this beloved city, and they represent the continuous strength and resilience of a community when gathered to support each other.