

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Fundraiser seeking to conjure up makeover for battered but beloved roadside character

BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER

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Winnie the Witch, the giant, popeyed figure built by a St. James man in 1977 to draw autumn visitors to his family farm, may be getting a makeover.

A local couple, Kenneth Maher Jr. and Victoria Johnston, started fundraising and seeking estimates from professional builders last week for Winnie, who stands over the greenhouses at Wicks Farm on Route 25A. Her hat, once proudly upright, now slumps to the side; her trunk is slightly bent; and a portion of her capacious black dress is missing, exposing wire undergirding to the world.

"I'd like the witch to stay around for another generation," said Maher, a funeral director at his family's St. James Funeral Home. Winnie, he said, is "comparable to the Long Island Duck," the duck-shaped Flanders building listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"We were born and raised in this town and both of us have very fond memories of her," said Johnston, a preschool aide. "Since I was a little kid, I've been saying, 'Hi, Winnie,' every time I pass her."

They visited the farm one recent afternoon and met David Wicks Jr., Winnie's creator, and Paul Wicks, his son. David Wicks' father bought the land in 1947 and the family started a popular farmstand in 1961; they closed most of their operations in 2016. David Wicks is retired, and Paul Wicks works for the Smithtown Highway Department.

The inspiration for Winnie "goes back to when I was a kid," David Wicks said. "You'd see these things around the country." His farm was one of the



Wicks Farm's Winnie the Witch, built in 1977, has seen better days. ■ Video: [newsday.com/longisland](https://www.newsday.com/longisland)



Wannabe fixer-uppers Victoria Johnston and Kenneth Maher Jr.

first, he said, to recognize the festive possibilities of the fall harvest, and the figures he built helped draw as many as 15,000 schoolchildren a year starting in the 1960s.

He started with an Uncle Sam made from melon crates and

Winnie The Witch

- 35 feet tall
- Made of scrap lumber, wire mesh, steel poles, roof shingles, crop frost blankets, paint
- Built in 8 days

later built a bat with a 25-foot wingspan, a pumpkin, a cat and scarecrows, all using material found at the farm. They now sit in a barn. Too big to be brought inside, Winnie has stood through run-of-the-mill storms and Superstorm Sandy.

"She took a beating," Paul Wicks said. "You try and stay out there throughout the whole storm and tell me how you feel."

Folklorist Nancy Solomon, director of the nonprofit Long Island Traditions, put Winnie in a tradition of occupational folk art that includes muffler men

and heroically proportioned vegetables outside Long Island garages and farm stands. The Big Duck, built by duck farmers, also belongs to this tradition.

These objects proliferated as car travel became common in the early 20th century and tend to be built by the tradesmen themselves rather than professional artists. "These are one of the few creative areas for traditional occupations," Solomon said. "They are a way to really announce who they are and entice people to come look at them and to be part of a cultural landscape."

For David Wicks, an artist is "a full-time person," and he was never that. He built his objects at night when his farming was done. Then again, he said, "Not many people can do what I did . . . If you do something no one else can do, you're an artist, no matter what field you're in."

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