

Boise leather artist, Kari McCluey is known by cowgirls for her whimsical chaps that embrace and embody femininity.

McCluey recently finished her first saddle, which will be displayed at the Mitchell Museum of Western Arts in Colorado.

She started the saddle as a part of an Idaho Commission on the Arts Apprenticeship with leather worker and rancher Deana Attebery and finished it with Meridian saddle maker Rick Bean.

On this episode of Expressive Idaho, Arlie Sommer visits McCluey's leather workshop.

Karie McCluey: There's different types of chaps for what you're doing. Bull riders would wear like a bat wing type of chap. They all have their own function. Shotguns or zip down full length chap, a lot of times it's a little warmer. Each event has different ... Like so cutting would be very very very very traditional, same thing with reined cow horse—traditional. They're not going to wear a pink pair of chaps.

I'm Karie McCluey and I'm in Boise, Idaho, and I'm a chap maker. I make lots of chaps. I make men's chaps. But I think what I'm known for and what I really love is like, women's chaps. Bold. I like girly stuff. I go really all out and colorful and crazy, I guess.

Deana Attebery: I'm Deana Attebery and I live in Emmett now, and I'm a leather artist and I'm a rancher. I run 30 acres, complete with horses, cattle and all that. Just had a calf a couple days ago. I've always drawn things ever since I could hold a pencil, and my parents saw my interest and I just took off with the leather work and fixed all the dad's tack for him.

I like teaching. I'm not the flashy person, but I like to share. I have a heart for people that want to learn.

The sound of this fringe slapping on the leather body of the chaps or chinks here is how it sounds when the girls walk with it.

Karie McCluey: I love chinks. They're the shorter chap that break at the knee, and so they have fringe that goes all the way around. I just think they're fun. They're ranchy. I love the movement of them. And the summer. They'll be a little cooler.

Deana Attebery: We both lived in Middleton and we were neighbors. She comes over with her horse and her chinks and wanted me to look at them because she knew I was doing leather work, and...

Karie McCluey: It's the first thing I made. I was so proud of em. And they are hideous. They're so bad. They're...

Deana Attebery: I wouldn't say that. They're not what you do today.

Karie McCluey: I still have them, and I love them because they're number ones. But yeah, Dena was super graceful about it and everything. She said, wow, you know, those are really great. And if you wanted to learn a little bit of stamping or something, I could teach you that.

Deana Attebery: By encouraging her and staying in her life and helping her with her tooling and everything. Look where she is now. She stayed true to herself. And that's, as a teacher you want to bring that out? You want to let them be who they are, create the things that are inside them.

Karie McCluey: That was it. That was my little step toward what is basically my whole world now.

My biggest clientele would be the ranch riders. That's a kind of a newer event is ranch versatility or ranch riding.

Deana Attebery: So they have all these trail obstacles they have to do — anything you would need to do on a ranch.

Karie McCluey: A lot of women are doing it, and mostly they wear chinks and I love chinks and I make them a lot. And then I love making women's stuff.

Deana Attebery: The girls, they just want to be pretty and they want to be punchy. They want to be cute. They want to be strong as well as being totally feminine. Carrie's work in particular really addresses that.

Karie McCluey: I kind of just really glommed onto color. I'd see a hide at the saddle shop that I worked, and I was like, oh man, I could almost envision what I'd make with that. You know, like he had a blue hide there, and I was like, oh, I want to do like morning glories or something. And so sometimes the leather just speaks to you.

When I first started doing all the color, which was right away, really chicks kind of dug it. But clearly I was laughed at. I really had to earn it. And it's very cool now. But like, man, I feel like it wasn't easy at first.

Deana Attebery: She's coming into a place where people are recognizing her for who she is. I mean, her work is very distinctive, Kari, because she always has had a unique style and it's just that she's now got it all put together in the color and the style and and all the things she's put the hard work into to learn more quality work with her tooling and all of that, that now is her time.

Karie McCluey: I don't know, I always feel like also, it seems like just meant to be, you know, like I made these purple chaps and had purple flowers and had white and they were so they were really feminine. And this woman walked into the horse park, and her hair was the same purple as those chaps. And I saw her see them. It was like magic. Like, I'm like, do you want to try them on? She was just like, over the moon, and they fit her like I made them for her. Like, they were perfect — no adjustments and she was all

smiles. And it was just, it was meant to be. And that happens a lot, where I just feel like I make chaps and their cowgirl finds them and they always fit.

I called to ask because I knew she had done these things.

Deana Attebery: Kari came to my house and we talked about saddles. Parts of saddles. Kind of just an education. The first meeting was kind of that and and talked about what kind of vision she had for the saddle.

Karie McCluey: It seems like pretty straightforward to me. I'm like, oh, I got this, I think. And then once I get right down to it, I'm like, well, I don't know how big that's supposed to be or where is this? It's a thousand different thoughts of how something should be done.

Deana Attebery: That's where my experience on the ranch comes in, because there's reasons for why we put things where we do on a saddle, because they have to be used. And as her mentor in this project, I've been encouraging her. I said, Kari, this needs to be you, like your chaps. So these are her ideas and designs. I'm just giving her guidance.

Kari McCluey: I really did a lot of pink because I wanted it to be very feminine. My tooling and my tooling pattern, I just wanted it to reflect the women who've shaped me. So all my flowers, each one represents a woman in my life. And so the other element that I added was pearls, because they're kind of like little pearls of wisdom.

I always have a story. It comes from deep, it comes from the heart, and I dream it. I'm always shooting for like beyond the stars. I think people can feel and see meaning and feeling.

You can see photos of her final saddle at [Boise State Public Radio dot org](http://BoiseStatePublicRadio.org).

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