

Exhibitor at Paradise City Arts Festival in Northampton finds stories behind arts, crafts often draw buyers



Photo - YOSHITAKA HAMADA

Above: Bill Rathbun, of Leverett, left, speaks with Jackie Mirtl, of Manchester, Conn., right, during the 20th Annual Paradise City Arts Festival at the Three County Fairgrounds in Northampton, Saturday, October 11, 2014.

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NORTHAMPTON — For some people it is the details, sheer beauty or elegance of a piece of art that draw them to it. But Kimberly Young, who was working a booth at the annual Columbus Day weekend Paradise City Arts Festival, said it is often a story that moves a person to want it.

The artists displaying their work “put their heart and soul into the things they are selling,” said Young, who was there Saturday to assist her mentor, Connecticut potter Tim Scull. Customers passing the booth, she noticed, were usually drawn in by the story behind how the artifacts are crafted or about the artist’s biography. Stories, she added, “are about a human connection, and that’s what we are all here for.”

This holiday weekend marks the 20th year the Paradise City Arts Festival has been held at the Three County Fairgrounds in Northampton. It continues through Monday. All of the 275 booths have red stickers on them announcing how many years the vendors have been displaying and selling at the event which usually attracts up to 15,000 visitors over the course of the weekend.

Linda Post, the founding director, said she was especially pleased by the number of exhibitors this year who have been at the festival from the start.

"It shows that they trusted us and agreed to try us out" when the festival was still just an idea, she said.

Four years after it started on the Columbus Day weekend, the Paradise City Arts festival expanded to include a second weekend of what it calls "functional and fine art" over the Memorial Day weekend.

One of those who has been displaying since the beginning is Rick Robinson of Schenectady, New York. He makes boxes, earring holders and small clocks out of burl wood.

He first heard about the festival through a trade magazine and decided to come because it was relatively close by. "I thought I would give it a shot," he said. He keeps coming back because of the quality of the exhibits that surround him. Last year Robinson grossed about \$5,000 in sales. The cost of a booth is nearly \$1,000, so the trip was worthwhile, he said.

Glassblower Gary Zack of Greenfield Center, New York, was at the festival for the first time this year, though he said he is about to retire as a glassblower and start painting. He hopes to be back for future festivals with his new art form. Zack had a story at the ready as to how he got attracted to glass. "My mother dragged me to church as a child. I never listened to the sermons but I always looked at the stained glass," he said.

Roger DiTarando, of Vernon, Connecticut, was selling outdoor metal sculptures of birds, rams, wolves and other animals. He traced his passion for sculpture to a seventh-grade art teacher "who took me under his wing." He went to art school, but the real breakthrough in honing his skills came through a job he had for three years as a jet engine metalsmith apprentice for aerospace manufacturer Pratt & Whitney.

Easthampton sculptor Matt Johnson, who has been showing at the festival for nine years, talked about one of the pieces he had on display. It is a baby carriage made of steel bars used for reinforcing concrete. In the seat is a large rock.

Part of how he sees his role as an artist is to combine materials in interesting ways, he said. Johnson sells both functional art, such as small tables made of stone and steel, and things that are meant mainly to be looked at. He said he hopes those pieces spark some kind of "intellectual stimulation" on the part of the beholder.

Shortly before noon Saturday, Nancy Harwood and Joan Walter, who had driven up from Waterford, Connecticut, to visit the festival, were sipping hot chocolate and plotting their next purchase. They bought leather wallets almost immediately after walking through the gates. Then they spotted a glass ring holder that they were about to lay claim to. The attraction? It's just beautiful, said Walter.

The Paradise City Arts Festival runs through 4 p.m. Monday. The price of admission is \$13 for adults, \$11 for seniors, \$8 for students and free for children under 12.

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