

Sculpture celebration started with simple idea

By Edward Terry, Editor, News-Topic (www.newstopic.net)

It started with a pig weather vane, which now adorns the roof of the Caldwell Arts Council at the corner of College Avenue and Norwood Street in Lenoir.

Since then, Caldwell County's love affair with sculpture has become a near obsession as evidenced by Caldwell County being home to the country's largest collection of public sculpture per capita in the United States. The Sculpture Celebration is the Southeast's longest running show of its kind.

The pig was the first in the Caldwell Arts Council's collection of nearly 80 publicly-displayed sculptures, most of which are outdoors for anyone to enjoy at any time of day. Not only has this unique collection of art become a major attraction, and point of pride, for the area, it's also brought some national attention.

In 2006, N.C. Secretary of Cultural Resources Libba Evans announced that Lenoir has more public sculpture per capita than any community of its size in the United States.

Art, specifically sculpture, is one of the first qualities that Caldwell County Tourism Director Brandon McCann brings up when promoting Caldwell County.

"Not a lot of communities have the quality of sculpture we do," he said. "It's definitely something that creates a lot of interest."

The Sculpture Celebration began in 1985 and has been a constant driving force in building up the area's collection as well as creating a sculptor-friendly environment.

It started small but attracts artists and visitors from across the country.

"It's a great show for the experienced artists, but also great for the first-time experience," Arts Council Executive Director Lee Carol Giduz said.

According to the Arts Council, the event's origin dates back to the early 1980s when Dr. Henry Michaux, a Lenoir native and sculpture professor at the University of South Carolina, conceived the exhibit with Sam Sturgis, a long-time director with the City of Lenoir Parks and Recreation Department. The goal was to host an event that would both celebrate sculpture and heighten the awareness about J.E. Broyhill Park.

Bill Brown Jr., a local artist, also consulted with Michaux and Sturgis for the event.

These early visionaries successfully created a partnership between the City of Lenoir, which funded the event, and the Broyhill Family Foundation, whose private donations were used to purchase selected works originally; the list of purchase sponsors has

grown through the years.

Since that time, the Arts Council has purchased more than 80 sculptures that may be seen around the county on street corners, in parks, public offices, schools, libraries and other public properties.

Some are easy to find, standing tall along a school entrance or along a busy highway. Others are hidden treasures, part of a community-wide scavenger hunt yielding discoveries at every turn.

During Lenoir's downtown revitalization, streetscape improvements were made to include brick planters with pads for both permanent and temporary displays. A drive downtown offers bold designs, vivid colors and eye-catching pieces decorating the sidewalks. The public sculptures are provided by Tucker's Sculpture Gallery in partnership with the City of Lenoir. The deal has been so successful, artists can hardly keep up.

"We can't keep any sculptures in our downtown," Lenoir artist and entrepreneur Keith Willis said. "We get them in there, and we sell them."

The original idea was to display the sculptures on a six-month rotation in the downtown area. Each of the pieces are for sale and would be replaced as buyers claimed them. Due to the popularity of Tucker's Sculpture Gallery, there aren't as many pieces on the streets as Willis would like the day of the Sculpture Celebration, but maybe that gives visitors a reason to come back again.

"I think it's one of the biggest things we have going for us," Willis said. "I think the arts—visual and performing—when it comes down to it is one of the key components of our revitalization efforts."

Those efforts are thriving today thanks to organizations like the Arts Council and events such as the Sculpture Celebration, Caldwell County native and artist Charlie Frye said.

He has watched both the sculpture event and the arts community grow tremendously over the years. The last five have been especially successful, he said—so successful that Frye has invested in his own art gallery on Main Street in downtown Lenoir. He hopes to see more local artists join him.

"Art, in general, in Lenoir and Caldwell County is really becoming one of our forefront attractions and amenities to offer to someone from out of town," he said, adding that many local residents are just discovering the wealth of visual and performing arts here. "We have art on so many different levels in this town. This is not a place where you can easily say 'there's nothing cultural around here' like you can in some small towns.

"You have to try hard not to see the public sculpture."

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