

Spilling Over

Bluegrass Pride Rainbarrel Auction combines art and environmentalism in Lex

By Kim Thomas

"Rain is grace; rain is the sky condescending to the earth; without rain, there would be no life."
— John Updike

Clean Water and EPA lawsuits have dominated the news in Lexington for months. This Saturday at Lexington Green, local environmental group Bluegrass PRIDE will host their annual Rainbarrel Reception, a model program combining the mission of environmentalism and local art.

Bluegrass PRIDE Executive Director, Amy Sohner says that the idea for the decorated rainbarrels was inspired by the Horse Mania program. "After receiving national attention in various publications and at conference presentation, our decorated program has been mimicked in more than 10 cities in North America. Rainbarrels are traditionally considered useful and not necessarily attractive. This is a great way to first, draw attention to individual actions that promote water quality, and second, provide an attractive addition to gardens and homes."

The Bluegrass PRIDE's Rainbarrel Reception Saturday will embrace the environmentally-friendly concept of collecting rainwater, saving money on water bills and easing the guilt of lawn watering and car washing during the drought that hot Kentucky July never fails to bring. It's hard to imagine a better lesson, using art to help make our families more conscious of self sufficiency and water preservation. Obviously, if we can gather the kids and create barrels to collect rainwater (while it's raining, like it has been here since, well, since last Halloween it seems) seems to be a lasting way to build eco-character.

Bluegrass PRIDE started the artistic rainbar-

rel program in 2004, hosting a reception and live auction for the artists and barrel bidders. Since that time, they have moved the auction to eBay and the reception has become their premier event. "We've also gotten word that other communities throughout the country, such as Kansas City, have adopted the program to raise awareness about stormwater management tools in their area," program director Lauren Bennett explains.

Bennett says, "For this round, we sent out a call for artists in November. Artists were selected based on a paragraph of their vision for a barrel and notified in January, with a deadline to return the barrels to us for top coating at the end of February. We then took the barrels to locations throughout Central Kentucky for a two-month display period leading up to the reception. During the display period, we also encouraged the public to vote for their favorite barrel and the winning artist will be presented with the 'Earth Artist Award.'"

Eco-Character Building

Bennett believes "the rainbarrels are a fun, creative way to draw attention to environmental issues in our community, particularly stormwater management and its impact on water quality in a state where stormwater is not treated before it flows into streams and waterways."

Bennett says the Rain Barrel Reception is "the only chance to see all of the 2009 artistic rainbarrels together in one place. It's also a great chance for anyone who is interested in bidding on one during the online auction to talk with the artist

and learn more about the one-of-a-kind work he or she did on their barrel."

Bluegrass PRIDE Rain Barrel Reception

The reception will be from 5pm in the Lower Atrium of Lexington Green. The reception is sponsored by Whitaker Bank and will be catered by Regatta Seafood. Wine, beer and soft drinks will also be provided. The reception is open to anyone interested in meeting the artists and seeing all of the barrels in person.

The eBay auction will also start on June 6th and will last until June 16th. The barrels will all start out at \$130. 27 barrels will be part of the auction. Plain barrels can be purchased year round from PRIDE for \$100 (55 gal.) or \$115 (60 gal.).

It always rains on tents. Rainstorms will travel thousands of miles, against prevailing winds for the opportunity to rain on a tent.

— Dave Barry

Barrels of Fun

Miles Johnson One of the barrels that will be bid on at the reception on Saturday is a mosaic design by Miles Johnson. Johnson is an art teacher at Meadowthorpe Elementary who, a couple years back was "enticed to design a rainbarrel as a piece of public art. I knew there was a

Bluegrass Pride/Wastebusters program but didn't know much about it." He was also intrigued that "they were offering educational programs at the schools through working in art and science programs, as well as getting schools to start a real working recycling program."

Johnson was pleased to eventually have students paint small recycle bins, and then present them to the Mayor, Superintendent, and city council members. "The kids' work sent a creative message right to the top (and they still are in use). We have now done this several times. This year, I painted a mosaic style barrel, and I had my 5th graders (and a few staff members along with my 3rd grade twin daughters) paint flowers on a different one. For other grades, I had them design their own drawing of a rainbarrel. The special thing about the PRIDE people is that they are educators!



Meadowthorpe 5th grader's barrel

They talk more about the benefits of REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE than other various groups who preach doom and gloom. If you educate people, it empowers them rather than adding stress in their lives. They teach people good habits that you can incorporate into your daily routine with less effort than you think! I feel comfortable that my own kids have learned from them (and sometimes have come home and taught me a thing or two that they learned in a program or fun project).

Johnson's mosaic barrel has a horse, sun, and recycle-friendly images and such reflecting Kentucky. He's enthusiastic about the design, exclaiming, "Mosaics are simply cool! I have a massive 18' x 6' paper one over at Faith Lutheran Church that I spent 10 weeks on with the congregation this Winter and Spring. I did a lot of over-size mosaics when I taught high schoolers years ago; it is truly a challenge, however, to paint in this style on a plastic barrel. The paint does not absorb,

so you have to paint small shapes, let them dry and repeat several times.”

He laughs, “my wife had to endure seeing it in the middle of the living room and often times our dining room table that we eat on (that’s part of being married to an artist I say). She enjoys the creative process as much as anyone, but is equally happy when the barrels leave for a new home. I brought the 5th grade barrel home as well to work on it.”

Johnson’s mosaic barrel took about a week to design, which he considers, “not too bad in project time. I did several sketches leading up to it to get a feel for what I wanted.”

The teacher says “working on a barrel in the winter is a challenge. I like to clear-coat spray as well as prime with something. If it is really cold, it adds time to your project. Mrs. Johnson will not me spray paint anything in the living room (imagine that). Personally, I love putting in a Star Wars movie and working. I can do this for hours!

His advice for home rainbarrel decorating: “Sketch first!! Doodle. Draw the shape of a barrel then contain the picture in it. If you want to have a little more fun, make a mock-up. Get an old Barrel of Monkeys game container and paint your design, and think about the surroundings of your barrel. Do you want it to blend in, or stand out?”

About the artist

Johnson grew up in Iowa, “pursued art pretty well in high school, then went to Upper Iowa University (not University of Iowa) for a year, then transferred to Columbia college, Columbia Mo. I have a B.S. in art 1991, was the last wave of people to do graphic design by hand (no computer).” Johnson draws extensively at restaurants around Lexington, and used to free lance a bit but has been too busy lately. “I still leave drawings everywhere I eat — if it is a sit-down establishment - and if I



Miles Johnson’s barrel



Sally Billings’ barrel

have a moment or two. I draw cartoons I developed in high school and college. My girls read books while we eat, and I draw (and my wife rolls her eyes at all of it). I did not intend on becoming a teacher. School was a struggle. I became an oil refinery/ power plant metals technician two years after college. I lived near Denver, traveled (Canada, Kuwait and South Africa). I left drawings at restaurants in all of those places as well. Practice makes you sharp,” he says.

Johnson has been with Fayette County schools for 9 1/2 years and has a Masters of Art in teaching (Art Ed) from EKU. He originally “was going to sub for a few months and go back to oil work after my girls were born, but I never went back.” He’s also on the Board of the Kentucky Art Education Association and is also a big thrift store shopper (remember to REUSE).

Human knowledge has been changing from the word go and people in certain respects behave more rationally than they did when they didn’t have it. They spend less time doing rain dances and more time seeding clouds. Herbert Simon

Sally Billings wanted to participate last year, but “missed the deadline.” This year, she made it. “As a photographer in the Bluegrass, I love photographing horses. Having minored in studio art at Transylvania, I also have a great appreciation for various artists’ styles. I knew I wanted to use a horse scene for the barrel, but didn’t want it to be a run of the mill Kentucky horse farm image. Last summer, my husband and I were at Shakertown, and I took some pictures of a horse that otherwise would probably be considered ‘ordinary.’ One horse photo in particular became a favorite from that trip. The horse popped his head over the top of the fence and I squatted down to get this really close up view of his face from the nostrils up. He was wearing a really funky neon orange bridle, which contrasted so well with his light

brown and white coloring and the crisp, blue sky. I’ve always loved that Andy Warhol pop art image of Marilyn Monroe and as I started playing around with the contrast on the photo, the pop art style seemed like an ideal way to capture a very Kentucky image in a very unorthodox manner. As I worked more on the barrel concept, I thought of all those Lynn Imaging cars that run around town wrapped with various images and colors and thought ‘why not wrap a barrel?’ Needing a weather proof material that was also cost effective, I settled on using a regular outdoor banner printed with the image.”

Billings says that once all the materials were gathered, the application of the banner took about 7 hours, but finding a location to apply the banner using the spray adhesive in February chill “took a little more creativity than I had anticipated. As you can imagine, 6 hours of spray adhesive indoors, even with windows open, makes for a fun afternoon project! My husband earned many brownie points for painstakingly helping me make sure to get as many bubbles out from under the banner as possible.”

Asked what tips she would give Ace readers if they wanted to design a rainbarrel for themselves, Billings had a few recommendations. “Create a concept that reflects your personal style and go for it! Love Coke? Paint one like a Coca Cola can. Cats fan? Show your Wildcat pride with a UK themed barrel. Make it a family project or let the kids find their inner Van Gogh and create a masterpiece all their own. Rain barrels are a wonderful way to add art to your home’s exterior while conserving resources.”

About the artist

Billings has been a Lexington resident for 11 years, and is “now making my home in beautiful,



Artist Sally Billings

downtown Lexington ... Like many artists, I haven’t been able to dabble in just one artistic medium. In addition to being a photographer, I am also a jewelry designer with a line called, SallyB. Having worked for nearly 6 years as a corporate event planner, I felt the tug to satisfy my artistic cravings on a more permanent basis. In 2005, I started a small business where I sell both my photography and jewelry and in 2007, left the 9 to 5 world to focus on my passion. My days are now split between working part time as the Marketing/Events Director for a local non-profit called Assurance, which helps young women and men with unplanned pregnancies, and pursuing my love of art.” ■

DIY Type?

Dan Purnell, Zone Manager of Lowe’s, says “rainbarrels are a great way to save money on water. Place the barrel under the downspout from your home. The rain will run into the barrel. Connect your water hose to barrel, and turn on the valve. Water will flow from the barrel to the end of your hose. This is a great way to water your garden, plants, and shrubs.”



Purnell says they’re also efficient and can save money. “You can find a rainbarrel at Lowes Inc. or any home improvement retailer. Lowes has one available for about \$90. For those of you who are inventive, it can easily be made from scratch. All you would need is a tote, a remnant hose, and a shut off valve. Doing it this way, it may only cost you \$25,” Purnell says. ■