

‘Reading Rocks’: Decorated Chairs Raise Funds for Literacy Council

BY SAM KRUYER Staff Writer, The Pilot

If you’ve taken a stroll through Southern Pines or Pinehurst in the past couple of weeks, you may have noticed an interesting trend. Several downtown establishments are now sporting beautifully decorated rocking chairs, all a part of the Moore County Literacy Council’s (MCLC) “Reading Rocks” fundraiser.

Local businesses, organizations, and individuals purchased 60 unfinished rocking chairs, either sized for an adult or a child, and then handed them off to several local artists to paint.

Each chair was a serious undertaking, requiring several steps of sanding, priming, and painting. Artists’ estimates of the time taken to complete each chair ranged from 70 to more than 100 hours.

Several of the artists drew inspiration from local themes when choosing a subject for the chairs. Painting chairs for BB&T and a private donor, Donald A. Parks, a retired dean of visual and performing arts at Delaware State University, agreed to take on the projects under one condition: “I basically said yes, but only if I could choose writers and illustrators from the area.”

To that end, Parks chose the work of local literary giants Glen Rounds and James Boyd as well as famed illustrator N.C. Wyeth to inspire his designs for the chairs. For the chair sponsored by BB&T, Parks chose to depict the cover of “Drums,” James Boyd’s 1928 novel illustrated by N.C. Wyeth, considered by many as one of the greatest novels ever written about the Revolutionary War. The cover illustration is depicted on the seat of the chair and on an accompanying pillow, set against the maroon color of the BB&T logo.

Parks then turned to beloved children’s author and illustrator Glen Rounds when painting a child’s chair for the private donor. Fans of Rounds will recognize Rounds’ iconic illustration of a dog, which serves as The Country Bookshop’s logo, on the back of the chair as well as an image from Rounds’ popular book “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” on the seat of the chair.

“My intention was to create a chair that would fit an area where a lot of children would be reading,” says Parks.

When painting a chair sponsored by The Pilot, local artist Sherry Samkus knew there was only one choice: publisher David Woronoff’s beloved dog Opie, who roams The Pilot’s office, soliciting treats from adoring staff.

“I saw Opie two summers ago being walked around, and I just fell in love with him,” says Samkus. “His personality just strikes me like Oscar Madison of ‘The Odd Couple.’”

Samkus hopes the portrait of Opie which adorns the seat of the rocking chair is up to the subject’s standards. “Opie hasn’t said anything but I think it works for Opie,” she says.

Frank Pierce, owner of Eye Candy Gallery in Southern Pines, was approached to paint a chair by Moore County’s most famous landmark, the Pinehurst Resort and Country Club.

“Someone that I thought was my friend volunteered me,” Pierce says jokingly, before adding “Of course, I’m always willing to help out local charities.”

Pierce based his chair’s design off of old images and advertisements for the resort, items which he’s been collecting for 20 years. Using the green color scheme of the resort, the chair includes an advertisement for Pinehurst from the early days of the resort printed onto a pillow.

Denise Baker, a retired art teacher from Sandhills Community College, painted two chairs, one sponsored by Berkshire Hathaway Home Services and the other by the Southern Pines Rotary Club.

With Berkshire Hathaway Home Services giving Baker a child’s rocking chair to paint, Baker wanted to keep the design fun.

"I tried to make it really whimsical with geometric patterns and shapes," she says.

Baker then went for a new challenge with the chair for the Southern Pines Rotary Club.

"I've painted a lot of furniture, which is why I chose to collage it," Baker says.

A printmaker, Baker has a special affinity for old books and decided to take this theme to the chair, decoupageing old book pages onto the rocking chair to create a collage of words and pages. Baker said the advantage of the design is the chair can go anywhere.

"The neutral book pages will look good in any environment," she says.

Mary Wright, an art teacher at Crain's Creek Middle School, was also no stranger to painting furniture. A former owner of a furniture design store, Wright chose to depict a mermaid on her chair, a subject Wright chose for the mythical creature's enduring popularity.

"It's for an auction, and it's for a good cause and I wanted [the MCLC] to benefit as much as possible and people love mermaids," she says.

While most organizations turned to experienced professional artists to paint their chair, the Weymouth Center and the Authors in Moore Schools (AIMS) program decided to take a chance on a few amateurs, calling on several local preschool and elementary school students to decorate the chair. Robin Smith, executive director of the Weymouth Center, said they wanted to "have the children be the artists."

Kids put their thumbprints on the chair and then painted them into various characters from David Soman's popular children's book series, "Ladybug Girl," including ladybugs, dragonflies, and bumblebees. The names of each child were then painted on the back of the chair.

Many of the artists usual mediums are not furniture, such as Pierce who has been an oil painter for 52 years. However, like the rest of the artists, Pierce was undaunted by a switch of mediums.

"I've done just about every kind of off-the-wall art project you can imagine," says Pierce. "It wasn't much of a stretch for me."

In addition to the rocking chairs, the artists' work can be seen all around Moore County. Wright is an accomplished muralist, with her murals covering the walls of several schools in Moore County, with several of her paintings on display at Sweet Basil as well. The Eye Candy Gallery, in Southern Pines, features the work of Parks and Pierce, while Parks also has work in the Beyond the Shutter Gallery, in Pinehurst.

While painting the chairs was a time consuming and often tedious task, all of the artists expressed excitement at being able to support a good cause.

"I'm always willing to take a break from doing my selling art to do something for a charity that I think is a good cause...I just said yes because I believe that all adults should have a chance to learn to read," Wright says.

With just the sale of the unfinished rocking chairs, the MCLC has already raised more than \$29,000. All of the finished rocking chairs will be auctioned off on Thursday, Aug. 25, at 6 p.m. at an event at the Fair Barn in Pinehurst. All proceeds from the auction and the selling of the unfinished rocking chairs go toward supporting the Moore County Literacy Council.

Contact Sam Kruyer at sjkruyer@gmail.com