

Celebrating Art, Literacy One Rocking Chair At a time

By: Laura Douglass, Staff Writer, The Pilot

The Starry Night — one of the most enduring and poignant works of Vincent Van Gogh — has captivated people for generations. For Pinehurst-based artist Kathy Leuck, the masterpiece is also the launching point for her latest project.

She is one of several dozen area artists who have partnered with the Moore County Literacy Council for “Reading Rocks,” a new fundraising program that is bringing together the creativity of the local art scene with businesses and nonprofits.

Reading Rocks allows interested sponsors to “purchase” a rocking chair that will be displayed through the summer at various locations and venues. Full-sized chairs are available for a \$500 donation and child-sized chairs can be purchased for \$400.

Each sponsor may select their own artist or the Literacy Council will provide one, with assistance from volunteers with the Artists League of the Sandhills.

The program will conclude with a Rocking Chair Fest and auction on Aug. 25 at the Fair Barn in Pinehurst. That event is co-sponsored and catered by Elliotts Catering; other major sponsors of the Reading Rocks program include The Pilot, Southern Pines Rotary Club, St. Joseph of the Pines, BB&T, First Bank, Aberdeen Exterminating and The O’Neal School.

“We are so excited by the amount of support we’ve received. We are really hoping to make this a community-wide event,” said Sandy Waterkotte, who presides over the Literacy Council’s board of directors. “At this point we have about 30 businesses and nonprofits that have sponsored a chair.”

Waterkotte said the program was developed after a noticeable drop in attendance at the organization’s primary fundraiser, the annual spelling bee competition.

“We put our heads together and thought it was time to try something different. We had heard about a program like this and loved the name. Reading does rock!” said Waterkotte. “We are so pleased that a lot of our longtime spelling bee sponsors and teams, like from First Bank and St. Joseph of the Pines, are participating in this too.”

Other sponsorships are coming from like-minded individuals pitching in together, such as a 14-member book club that has purchased a rocking chair and 5 members of a local church who went in together.

Sponsors may provide their own artist but that is not a requirement, Waterkotte explained. The Literacy Council has partnered with volunteers from the Artists League of Sandhills and has a waiting list of eager artists ready and waiting for a sponsor. It is up to each artist and sponsor to be creative and decide how to decorate or design the chair.

The completed chairs will be marked with the name of the sponsor and the artist, and then displayed from June 1-August 1 at the sponsor’s location or another venue of choice. The chairs will then be auctioned to the highest bidder at the Rocking Chair Fest in August.

“This new program is going like gang busters,” said Executive Director Kris Dahlberg. “We have so many people signed up. We are really excited!”

An avid reader, Leuck was invited to participate when a chair was purchased by a fellow parishioner and donated in the name of Congregational Church of Pinehurst. A former nurse of 44 years, she retired to the area three years ago and said she finally has time to fully embrace her creative side.

“I really wanted to be an artist but my mother insisted that I do something more practical with my life,” she said. “But art is my passion. I have taken hundreds of artists workshops since the mid 1970s. I cannot not do it. This project brings together two things I love, reading and creating art.”

It was her recent reading of Irving Stone’s book, “Lust for Life, the life of Vincent Van Gogh,” that inspired her vision. He was impoverished and plagued by self-debt, yet Van Gogh could not stop himself from going out the next day to paint from dawn to dusk. The Starry Night was painted in Arles, France, only a year before he would die by his own hand in 1890.

Leuck said reading about his struggles resonated with her, and she calls her creation “Lust for Life.” It will include an homage to his vibrant and swirling night sky, with the seat decorated by decoupage pages from Stone’s book. She said the book also made her wish that she could have reached out and been a friend Van Gogh, to encourage him to be kinder to himself.

It is that kind of gentle encouragement that Moore County Literacy Council volunteers offer their students every day. Working one-on-one with adult learners, volunteers help to battle illiteracy and proceeds from the Reading Rocks program will be used to directly support those efforts.

“I was so touched when I read the book. That is what tied it all together,” Leuck said. “I love to use my art to raise money for good causes. I’ve not done a chair before but I am real anxious to see how the auction goes. And I can’t wait to see what other people are doing too.

“There is no greater gift than to be taught to read and no better talent bestowed by God than the gift of creativity. Reading does Rock!”

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