



CONCRETE CREATURES

Create A Buzz in Downtown Glen Ellyn

BY DEBBIE VENEZIA, A.C.E REPORTER

This season will go down as the summer of the cicadas, the one where Illinois residents saw the emergence of both the 13-year and 17-year broods, an occurrence that surfaces once every 220 years. While reports of the phenomenon were aired well in advance of the monthlong invasion, entomologists failed to tell us about the emergence of a new brood of mutant insects that infiltrated downtown Glen Ellyn. Weighing in at eight pounds and measuring 18 inches at full maturity, this colorful breed doesn't fly, trill, or crunch and lives in perpetuity.

If you'd like to learn about the origin of these oversized creatures, ask Dawn Smith, executive director of the Alliance of Downtown Glen Ellyn (ADGE), whose mission is "to stimulate economic growth in the central business district." In her role, she works with the Village of Glen Ellyn to implement innovative ways to draw people to the heart of Glen Ellyn. Smith will tell you that earlier this year, Julie Spiller, owner of the eclectic shop Gather and Collect at 501 Pennsylvania Avenue, heard from one of the customers about an opportunity for engagement with a large-scale public art program. The concept would use the approaching cicada infestation as a collaborative exhibition theme to build community.

"Cicada Parade-a" is the initiative of The Insect Asylum (TIA), a museum and community center in Avondale, Chicago, that focuses on, well, insects—more than 4,500 of them. Working with Formstone Castle Collective, TIA produced hand-crafted plaster and metal cicada sculptures that could be purchased, adorned, and installed in communities to spark conversations and encourage a positive environment.

Smith was initially reluctant. After all, some viewed the oncoming natural phenomenon as apocalyptic. But she soon warmed to the idea after doing her research. "This turned out to be a great destination project," she said. Smith ordered 25 forms and found that business leaders from more than 30 storefronts hoped to secure one.

When the sculptures arrived, resourceful shop owners and employees began embellishing their pieces using found objects and a lot of imagination. By channeling their artistic selves, the staff members were able to create works that not only aroused interest but also captured the essence of the shops they represented.

Spiller, who is not an artist by trade (she was kicked out of a college art class as her instructor felt she was better suited for another field), said she had great ideas but

little experience in execution. Even so, Spiller started working on her piece. She harvested art supplies from her shop and used thrifted origami paper, tennis racquets, pill cases, and an assortment of blocks and tiles to craft a sculpture that has drawn the attention of regulars and visitors, some coming to the store specifically to see the cicada.

Managers at the Bookstore of Glen Ellyn, 475 North Main Street, were also eager to participate. Employee Kiwi Rose, a high school graduate on her way to college, took over the creative process. She repurposed pages from a damaged book, dyed and affixed them to the cicada form using a decoupage medium. A true team player, Basil, as he was so christened, bears the names of all 18 shop employees on his bottom.

Emily Henkels and Meg Dedoph, two employees of String Theory, 477 North Main Street, were set to take on one of the sculptures. After spending time with the form that has since been named Hank, they fashioned a vibrant topcoat made from granny squares and a neon-colored pompom hat, an ensemble stunning enough to put him on Vanity Fair's best-dressed list. Supplying him with a crochet hook of his own, Hank can be seen on the street starting his own design.

Eric White, owner of the Glen Art Theatre and avid supporter of community events, snagged one of the forms and immediately got to work. White minored in art and used his experience to create a celluloid cicada sporting wings made from strips of 35mm film trailers left over from pre-digital days. The sculpture, a favorite among cinephiles and cicada seekers, was strategically placed under the marquee at 540 Crescent Boulevard to protect it from the elements.

All the sculptures were installed in late May and are now in flower pots, buildings, and trees throughout downtown Glen Ellyn. Later this month, they will be collected and put up for auction at the 2024 Festival of the Arts at Lake Ellyn Park, 645 Lenox Road, on August 24 and 25. The cicada display will accompany the work of 70 juried artists in booths lining the wooded shoreline of Lake Ellyn. Art fair-goers may peruse and purchase 2D and 3D art in various mediums, including paintings, ceramics, glass, wood, metal, and mixed media. Live music, children's activities, and refreshments will be on-site to add to the celebration of art that brings thousands of visitors to the scenic park as it has for the past 55 years.

During the fest, those interested in adding a cicada or two to their permanent art collections may bid on ADGE's website at downtownglenellyn.com/cicadas-on-parade. Proceeds from the auction will support the Glen Ellyn Public Art Committee's efforts to bring more murals and installations to the community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie Venezia is the director of Arts DuPage, a countywide arts council under the umbrella of DuPage Foundation that supports, promotes, advocates for, and distributes grants to the arts in DuPage County. Best known for artsdupage.org, its comprehensive event website for arts and entertainment, Arts DuPage showcases the vibrant local arts community, which generates cultural, economic, and social benefits for DuPage County and its residents.

Looking for something to do? Go to artsdupage.org, your guide to arts and entertainment.

