Barreling ahead

Rain Barrel Project gets bigger for second auction at SBMA

By AMANDA GRAY
South Bend Tribune

Water, water everywhere and, hopefully, filling up a backyard rain barrel!

For the second year in a row, Indiana University South Bend Center for a Sustainable Future has partnered with the local arts community over water sustainability in the Rain Barrel Project.

The second annual Rain Barrel Auction takes place at 7 p.m. Friday at the South Bend Museum of Art, and organizer Kathleen Petijean says the project is a "huge success."

"We've enlisted area artists and artist groups, including schoolchildren, to paint former Coke syrup barrels that were donated from Coca-Cola," she says.

The barrels are washed and sanded by Petijean, who then gives them out to local artists to transform into painted rain barrels that attach to the downspout of house gutters to collect rainwater. Last year, 10 barrels were created for the auction. This year, 15 barrels will be auctioned off, and five will be donated to local nonprofit community gardens and schools.

The auction will be a celebration of the rain barrels, which will be displayed in a donated garden from Fossey Landscape. Petijean says:

"The purpose of this project is to raise awareness of water as a natural resource," she says.

Petijean says that the way the local sewer system is constructed, too much rainwater in the sewers will send sewage into the St. Joseph River.

"One thing that homeowners can do (to prevent this) is use a rain barrel," she says.

"Each barrel is 55 gallons, and you can use the water for lots of things — not drinking, but it's great for plants and outdoor use." Mike Keen, the director of IUSB's Center for a Sustainable Future, says the project is bigger than he ever dreamed possible.

"We have been absolutely thrilled by the support from the broader community, the city of South Bend and the artists community, to come together over this subject and celebrate," he says.

The invitation to the auction reads, "Evening wear and garden gloves recommended!" — and they mean it, Keen says. Guests and hosts will turn up in formal dress and — you guessed it — garden gloves to the event.

Keen says the project started as one of the center's Fellowship Projects, where it recognizes several members of the community and helps them start sustainability efforts.

"I am blown away by last year's success," he says. Last year, the project raised more than $15,000, which was split between the center and the SBMA.

Museum marketing director Peg Luecke says the event provides a great opportunity for the public to visit the museum and its collections.

"It's a wonderful way to connect the community to art and the environment," she says. "Anytime we can make the connection for people between art and their everyday lives, that's a good thing."

The community should celebrate the local artwork on the barrels, she says. "What's amazing is that the barrels are painted by everyone, from preschoolers to professionals," she says. Two of the barrel artists have close ties to the museum, she says. Artist Mitz Sabato has a sculpture in the museum collection, and Kristin DeMeester teaches a jewelry class at the museum.

Barrel artist Phil Kwiecinski says the project reminded his creative spark.

"It was a lot of fun," he says about designing the barrel. "I hadn't painted in a while — it refreshed me at first. But as I painted, I noticed that the hardest part is knowing when to stop."

Kwiecinski's Georgia O'Keeffe-inspired barrel was displayed in Fiddler's Hearth.

"I was at last year's auction and thought that it would be neat to see something of her artwork on a barrel," he says. "Over Christmas, I decided to do two of her paintings."

Kwiecinski says her images of flowers are appropriate for a garden setting, where the barrels would potentially be placed.

"I hope the attendees like it," he says. "I like all of her images, and one close-up view of flowers are beautiful."

He says people don't get a sense for the Auction

The Indiana University South Bend Center for a Sustainable Future presents the "2nd Annual Michiana Original Art Rain Barrel Auction" from 7 to 9 p.m. Friday at the South Bend Museum of Art, 120 S. St. Joseph St., South Bend. Admission is free. For more information, call 574-235-4429 or visit the website southbendart.org.

Kathleen Petijean poses with the rain barrel she painted for the Rain Barrel Project auction.

Photos provided.

See RAIN/84