

Color on the concrete at Beachfront Park

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Amidst the Fourth of July activity throughout the afternoon in Beachfront Park, there was another splash of color and creativity mixed in.

For the past 16 years, local artists have gathered on the concrete to work on chalk masterpieces in an event known as “Pastels in the Park.”

It has become a popular attraction, yet maybe the most frequently misunderstood.

“Everybody thinks it’s a competition,” said event founder Ron Cole with a look of exasperation. “I would never... art is so precious that the thought of one piece of art being better than another is just...

“For me, this is the universe coming down through the humans and out onto the concrete. The energy that creates is what does it for me.”

Although there are no winners or losers, the event is so frequently mistaken for a contest that it has become something of a running joke among the artists.

“We make jokes about everybody being in second place,” said longtime organizer Adrianna Stefko, who has completed several pieces herself in the 12 years she has been involved with “Pastels in the Park.”

But rather than a competition to find the “best,” the event is a thank-you to each sponsor who helps provide scholarships for Cole’s Gateway Education summer camps.

“After the first camp was over, I found out that a lot of the kids were sad because they couldn’t go to camp,” Cole said. “They didn’t want to tell their parents, because they knew their parents didn’t have enough money.

“I didn’t realize that this is something that comes with summer camps, the part where you generate scholarships so kids can go to camp.

“I didn’t want to do something where I had to just ask for money, because that always felt really lame,” said Cole. “So I said, ‘Okay, what we are going to do is, we are going to ask for scholarships. And the way we are going to say thank you is, we are going to do these artworks.’”

The name of each patron is displayed on a sign in the grass near a square that is given to an artist to create their chosen work.

Cole said that during the first year, “Pastels in the Park” drew 12 patrons and 12 artists.

“Since then we have gotten more businesses,” said Cole, “and more groups of people coming together to help give us scholarships.”

This year, Gateway Education received 29 scholarship donations, more than doubling the total from the first event.

“The more the merrier,” Stefko said. “We will always do our best to represent the business or whoever wants to be a part of it. Thirty is a good number, though.”

“There are always more scholarships needed than we have, so we try to do partial scholarships and work with the family,” Cole added.

Stefko said the only requirements to be an artist in “Pastels in the Park” is to be at least 16 years old, and to provide a portfolio to prove you can finish a piece.

Some of the artists are frequent participants, but each year brings some new faces to Beachfront Park.

“It is interesting to see how it goes,” Stefko said. “Sometimes, your favorite artists aren’t able to make it. This year, I think we had seven regulars that couldn’t make it because they either moved or were out of town.

“But that creates an interesting opportunity for somebody new to come in. You never know what people will come up with.”

Although the squares are set aside for the chosen artists, anyone is allowed to participate in the middle of the concrete slab, where a large space has been set aside for doodles. Chalk is made readily available.

As with any chalk art, the impermanence of the pieces make them unique to the moment. Stefko said that after the Fourth of July, and sometimes even during the holiday, artists can pretty much count on their work being disturbed by footprints, wheel marks and rain.

“As artists, we have to be willing to let them go the second that we are done,” Stefko said.

“We use sugar water, which will seal it a little bit, but it is not really for preservation. It is for layering purposes.

“So you can’t get your feelings hurt once you are done. If that means you have to walk away and never look at it again, so be it.”