

HCS Family Services makes serving an art

After three-quarters of a century, agency tries new tack to support homelessness prevention

By Ken Knutson

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A seven-foot-tall dandelion has suddenly sprouted at Oakbrook Center. The sculpture may resemble an oversized weed, but its official name, "Wish," suggests that it was nurtured by a special hope.

On May 19, officials of HCS Family Services, along with sponsors and artists, celebrated the opening of the In Bloom outdoor sculptural display of more than 30 pieces placed throughout the open-air mall.

The event was organized by Hinsdale-based HCS, which serves low-income residents in southeast DuPage County, to increase awareness of and raise funds for the agency's homelessness prevention programs.

Kathy Harris, a member of the HCS board and lead organizer of In Bloom, said the primary objective of the display is to elevate the 74-year-old agency's visibility among people in the region.

"This event has been about the exposure," Harris said, standing near one of the gallery signs featuring the organization's name. "People are going to hear 'HCS Family Services' and you're not going to have to describe who you are. People will have heard about us."

"I believe, from the bottom of my heart, that this is going to catapult HCS into the next level."

That level, according to Executive Director Susan Fritz, involves cultivating wider and deeper connections with area businesses and potential supporters to expand service delivery.

Making a Difference

"That's why we're doing it, so we can build more relationships. And then that will give us the confidence to build an off-site satellite office," Fritz said, naming Willowbrook as a target location for such a facility.

Apart from three fine art sculptures, artists were given one of three fiberglass shapes to serve as their canvases: a bench, a birdbath or a giant frog atop a lily pad. Prizes were awarded to the winners of a contest before a ribbon-cutting officially opened the display.

Fritz introduced the idea for the art event, a concept she brought over from her previous job as executive director of Naperville United Way.

Chuck Fleming, general manager of Oakbrook Center, admitted he took some convincing when HCS first approached him about putting vibrantly colored sculptures around the vanilla mall.

"I was the ultimate skeptic," he acknowledged, concerned that it might detract from the campus' aesthetic quality.

But he became a believer as the gallery took shape and expects the estimated 6 million mall visitors who will see it through its ending date of Aug. 21 will appreciate its originality.

"It far exceeds what I thought could happen. I think it going to be a pure success," Fleming said.

Dan Dunn, vice chairman of the HCS board, said he was inspired enough by the concept to help sponsor the creation of the "Wish" dandelion.

He noted that the original



Dan Mitchell takes a photo of his daughter, Elizabeth, with artist Tia Etu, who created "Bullfrog." The piece is one of three fiberglass frog sculptures in honor of Chicago sports teams that are part of the In Bloom art display. Local artists designed the pieces, which are located throughout the open-air mall. (Jim Slonoff photos)

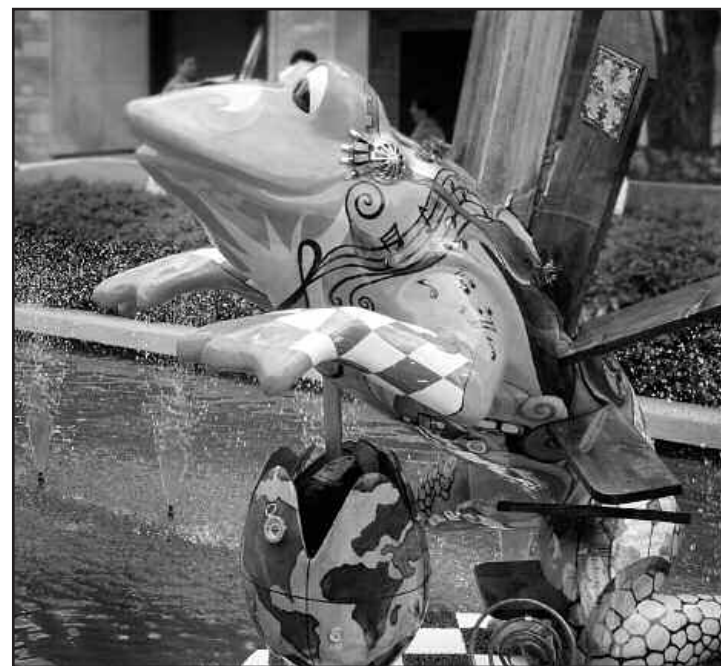
design called for a much taller sculpture that exceeded the comfort level of mall officials but said seeing the entire gallery materialize after 18 months of planning is rewarding.

"It's an offshoot of what HCS has going on. The parent mentoring program, breaking the cycle of poverty, is really exciting. And an event like this, to be able to build that much more awareness, is awesome. It's just one avenue to allow people from Oak Brook and surrounding communities to hear about it," Dunn said.

Harris related the experience of one HCS client who derives great spiritual nourishment from the case management services and parenting resources that the agency offers.

"She loves coming to HCS because she said that when she walks out, she feels like she's just come from church," Harris said. "You start from the very beginning and you work your way up. Each step takes you much closer being self-sufficient. It's a really good feeling to be able to provide those kinds of services to people."

Several artists were presented with judges' awards for their work. Kimberly Darovec was thrilled to learn her frog sculpture, Foxtrot Fitz Collins, won best in show.



This frog sculpture, "Foxtrot Fitz Collins," won best in show for artist Kimberly Darovec. Visitors to Oakbrook Center this summer can vote for their favorite In Bloom sculpture by texting according to signs next to each piece.

Artists had one month to complete their pieces, which Darovec said meant at least three hours of work every day. It was her first foray into a juried event of this nature.

"I was inspired to try something new," she said. "I figured, 'What better way to jump into doing things 3-D than doing it on a large public scale?'"

Fritz said the goal is for the art fundraiser to become a recurring feature at Oakbrook Center.

"We're hoping this is an

every other year event and that (the shopping center) will love it too and will want to continue with us," she said.

In Bloom will conclude with a Sept. 24 auction of the sculptures at Chicago Marriott Oak Brook, with the proceeds going to support HCS programs.

— *Making a Difference is a yearlong partnership between The Hinsdalean and HCS Family Services, which works to empower families and change lives.*



Kelly Gilkerson enjoys the warm weather and a phone conversation while sitting on one of the artistic benches created for HCS Family Services' In Bloom art display.