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A Structure to Share
Sculpture construction at ETSU to take 3 weeks, bring community to campus, art to public

Patrick Dougherty grew up building stick forts and wandering the woods near Chapel Hill, N.C. Thirty years into a career as an environmental artist, Dougherty is still traipsing through wooded areas snipping saplings and building just-as-fanciful structures, albeit on much grander scales, around the world – France, Hawaii, Australia, Korea, Hungary, Scotland, Brussels and dozens of United States – more than 230 to date.

This month, Johnson City, Tenn., joins the list. Dougherty is designing one of his monumental “stickwork” sculptures on the ETSU campus, between the school’s oldest building and the carillon bell tower. As students and faculty walk by on their way to classes, Dougherty and groups of volunteers, have begun the three-week-long process of building a temporary structure of woven saplings designed especially for the grounds of ETSU.

The level of campus and local involvement is almost as thrilling as the opportunity to bring this level of public art to the area, say Mary B. Martin School of the Arts officials. “It takes a large crew to harvest the saplings, prepare the site, and then build the work,” says Director Anita DeAngelis. “This is pretty exciting for us, especially to have assistance from so many participating ETSU groups such as our physical plant staff and the ETSU Arboretum. Dougherty really engages the community with all the volunteers. The project truly is public.”

The cadre of more than 100 volunteers is split half and half, campus and local volunteers, who are all really pumped about the unique experience, says MBMSOTA Assistant Director Heidi Ehle. Classes and students from Art & Design, a co-sponsoring department, and faculty and staff are working in tandem with area residents under the guidance of the “Stick Man.” “They’re thrilled and Patrick really takes the time to describe his process and get them on board with his thinking, no matter how vague or specific it might be,” Ehle says. “He’s really great. He told me this morning, when he had a team of all women, ‘I’m not prejudiced toward women or men workers because women have a habit of working well together and that’s as good as brawn, he said.’”
Dougherty has learned that using volunteers builds a stronger structure, literally and figuratively. “The purpose of my work,” Dougherty says, “is to build a great sculpture that excites people’s imaginations, but one of the secondary gains is [that] I have managed to figure out how to use a number of people to be involved in it through a main organization or school. It’s always hard to hate a sculpture if your neighbors are working on it … Then their friends come down and look at it. It’s easier to embed a sculpture in the community if there is some support.”

Not only does the artist have his own process – gathering unneeded saplings in areas near the build site, studying the site then designing to fit with the surroundings naturally and, finally, weaving the saplings into his vision – but the community works through its own process, Dougherty says. “There’s always a way it starts out,” he says. “People are wondering what it is and, you know, maybe saying, ‘That’s not going to work out. It’s a stupid thing.’ Then you often have the same people driving by or walking by the site. So there is a kind of conversion that has to take place where the piece looks better. It has more credibility … It shows some of the vitality we are putting into it … And they think, ‘Oh, yeah.’

“A lot of times they end up coming up in droves and talking to you, going through and looking at it.”

More than 125 volunteers from campus and the community are already on the three weeks of schedule, Ehle says, which started Oct. 30, with sapling harvesting before Dougherty arrived Sunday. Work on the actual build site, on ETSU’s Stout Drive circle in front of Gilbreath Hall, began Wednesday, Nov. 6. Scaffolding went up Thursday. “There’s already a lot to see,” DeAngelis says. “We have really made some progress.”

Construction of the all-natural site-specific sculpture, which should last two to four years, will continue 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and the first weekend through Friday, Nov. 22. Spectators are encouraged to visit, and Dougherty’s sculptures are the kind that invite and welcome exploration by and interaction with the viewer. “It’s remarkable to think he’s able to build these large-scale structures in such a short amount of time,” DeAngelis says. “We are so excited to be able to be a part of this and bring the experience to our school and area – whether they volunteer to work, come walk through it when it is finished or just drive by.”

There will be an additional opportunity to meet and hear from the artist, on Monday, Nov. 18, at 7 p.m. in Martha Street Culp Auditorium, when Dougherty will discuss his stickwork. His new book, *Stickwork*, will also be available at the event. A reception will follow, and both lecture and reception are free and open to the public.
For more information on Dougherty’s work, visit http://www.stickwork.net. For more about this event or Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, visit www.etsu.edu/martin or call 423-439-TKTS (8587). Follow Mary B. Martin School of the Arts on Twitter at TheArtsAtETSU and on Facebook.