

Young Leadership Council rolls out N.O. streetcar art initiative

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STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW HINTON

Artist Lucrece Griffin-Tucker, top left, her husband, Jim Tucker, bottom left, and artist Jason Chaffin examine a streetcar prototype after it was unveiled at Young Leadership Council's meeting at Pat O's on the River in the French Quarter Sunday November 11, 2007.

A fiberglass streetcar sculpture unveiled Sunday is the latest fundraising creation of the Young Leadership Council.

In a campaign dubbed "A Streetcar Named Inspire," the council will auction off 200 fiberglass replicas of the distinctive New Orleans streetcars, with proceeds to go toward building the city's first streetcar museum. The auction will coincide with the re-launch of the full St. Charles streetcar line, scheduled for early 2008; the line made a partial return Saturday.

The project echoes the YLC's 2000 auction of 100 fish sculptures decorated by local artists. The Festival of Fins campaign raised a half-million dollars for local charities. In a similar public-art event this spring, the Fore!Kids Foundation recruited local artists to paint 40 fleur-de-lis sculptures that were displayed and sold to benefit 35 local children's charities.

On Sunday, YLC leaders unveiled the streetcar's master replica to an audience of a few dozen artists gathered at Pat O's on the River, in the old Jax Brewery. YLC President Christopher Reade roamed the room beforehand, giving each artist a to-scale drawing of the roughly 6-foot-long, 2-foot-high miniature trolley.

Artist Bob Shaffer, known as Dr. Bob, was among those waiting to see the master replica. "I don't know if it's going to be solid or hollowed out," he said. "And I'm wondering if it's going to have wheels that turn. But I'm sure I could make little creatures sticking out the windows. This will be a new challenge, and I'm looking forward to it.- I've got my arsenal of special-effects stuff waiting in my studio."

One of Dr. Bob's trademarks is bottlecaps, often stuck on the frames of the "Be Nice or Leave" signs for which he is best known. Over the years he has collected a cache of caps from the now-discontinued beer called Big Easy. "I've been saving them for some special occasion," he said, estimating that he had ample supply to panel an entire streetcar.

When the sculpture was unveiled, Dr. Bob's questions were answered. It is hollow, and artists are welcome to add wiring, lights or more, as long as they figure out how to power it, said Amy Catalanotto, one of the project managers for the campaign.

But the wheels don't turn. Appendages are permissible but can make the sculpture more prone to vandalism, a lesson learned during the Festival of Fins, Catalanotto said. The Arts Council of New Orleans will hold a session for artists on guidelines.

Steve Ulness, a sculptor for Mardi Gras Decorators, which created the master replica, made most of the sculpture's dimensions true to the original streetcar. But he and his colleagues intentionally reduced the number of windows, from 13 to six, making each of the remaining windows bigger so that artists could more easily create characters in them.

Because the finished sculptures are meant to be displayed along the city's streetcar lines, designers created a tall pedestal for the sculptures so that they can be properly viewed from a passing streetcar.

Among those attending the unveiling Sunday were art teachers from the Recovery School District, who will hold a contest among their classes. The winning class will win their own chartered streetcar ride, Catalanotto said.

The painter Geyo, also known as E. Darlene Guillot, an Algiers native and artist in the Festival of Fins, was pleased with choice of streetcars as a subject. When she was little, she said, the Canal Street streetcar was how everyone got around. Even the sound of it was comforting, she said, recalling how its purring and rocking could lull babies to sleep. "It's an icon," she said.

Paulette Lizano of Lizano's Glass Haus in Metairie viewed the streetcar and declared, "I will definitely cover it in glass." Then, speaking about how so many artists had left town after Hurricane Katrina, she added that the YLC project gives "local artists a chance to show that they're still here."

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