



Totem times

'Traveling Totems' descend on Ambler First Friday
... Page A7



Dolan Fund party

Kelly Ann Dolan Fund to host awards dinner
... Page A4

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First Fridays feature 'Traveling Totems'

By Eric Devlin

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Visitors to Ambler's First Friday events over the past several months may have noticed an interesting new art project getting off the ground.

Beginning this past June, artist Lynn Hoffmann has been busy working on stacked ceramic art that she hopes will help bring in customers to borough businesses. The "Traveling Totem Project," as its known, is a series of pottery totem poles, handmade by residents during First Friday events through October. Once finished, the totems will be displayed in local businesses that have chosen to take part, for public viewing, before the totems are sold in an auction with the money then donated to charity.

"The project got started at First Friday when I met Karen Palmer," Hoffmann, 54, said. "I thought, 'Yeah, I'll do that. I'll take my studio out into the streets and have some fun with some people.' I didn't really have any expectations. And then my friend who was helping me said, 'Well, if you're going to bring you're [pottery] wheel, what am I going to do?' And I said, 'Well, you can do totem poles.'"

With that, Hoffmann and her friend set up station along Ridge Avenue during the June First Friday and had an overwhelming response of roughly 60 people stop by to see what they were doing and make pieces for the poles.



Photos courtesy of Lynn Hoffmann

Lynn Hoffmann and visitors to Ambler's First Friday show off a ceramic piece that will become part of the Traveling Totems art project Hoffmann is creating during First Friday in Ambler.

"So I have all those pieces," she said, "I put them in the kiln, I fired them and there was really no theme or anything in the beginning. At one point I started thinking, 'What are we going to do with these totem poles?' and I thought, 'Wow, the perfect thing to do would be to put them together and start giving them to people. Like, say, give them to the Wissahickon Valley Watershed or the Mattie Dixon Community Cupboard to put them in their silent auctions and raise money for them.'"

From there, Hoffmann said she tried to decide how to get the word out to residents who played a part

in the poles that their work would be on display. It then occurred to her that by giving the poles to participating businesses in Ambler Main Street, it would make people who worked on a pole want to see it on display, and thereby attract potential customers to different stores in the borough.

"If the story got written in the paper, people could go, 'Oh, I did that. Oh wow, that's great, my totem's going to be at such-and-such a place, you know? Let's go see it,'" she said. "It would bring people into those businesses, help the foot traffic in Ambler and then eventually after they're in the stores ... we would put

them in a silent auction and then that money would go to charity."

Right now, Hoffmann said, she's working on three different themed totem poles. The first has a down-by-the-sea theme, the second theme is tranquility and the last one is the birds in the trees. First Friday attendees make individual pieces.

"For the next one, the tranquility piece, they'll be making flowers, lily pads," she said. "For the one for From the Boot, are minnows, shells and starfish. I have molds for some of them. It's pretty easy. They're projects that don't take that long."

So far, five businesses



Lynn Hoffmann is working on the Traveling Totem art project, which has incorporated resident created pieces completed during First Fridays in Ambler.

have confirmed that they will host the totem poles and Hoffmann said her goal is to do 10 in order to call the project the '10 Traveling Totems.'

"I'll just have to come up with 10," she said with a laugh. "I mean six is definitely doable."

As a whole, Hoffmann

said she's got a swirling mixture of emotions about the project but can't wait to share the end result.

"It's super scary," she said. "But I'm super excited about it. I just think it's fantastic."

Follow Eric Devlin on Twitter @Eric_Devlin.