

Take an 'Animal Adventure'

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Whether it's a beloved family pet or a ferocious wild beast, we humans just can't seem to get enough of animals. We invite them into our homes, seek them out in zoos and safaris, and weave them into the stories we tell. We even name our sports teams after them!

It's no surprise, then, that the Village of Tinley Park decided to give animals the spotlight this year during its annual Benches on the Avenue public art project. Featuring nearly two dozen animal-themed benches that you can actually sit on as well as admire, these wonderful works of art are on display now through October between 172nd and 174th streets along Oak Park Avenue in Downtown Tinley.

Since its debut in 2004, the Benches on the Avenue program has grown to become one of the region's most popular public art displays, attracting thousands of visitors to Tinley Park each year. The colorful works of art feature the talents of both amateur and professional artists, who create their benches around a single unifying theme. This year, it's "Animal Adventure."

But while the theme may change every year, the joy the benches bring to visitors never changes. Just ask local artist Marty Rose, who has been participating in the Benches on the Avenue program since the start.

"I see the satisfaction in a lot of people's eyes when they walk down this whole avenue and see all these benches, because of the fact that there are so many different creations, and every one of them is a new experience," Rose said. "These are time consuming, so when people appreciate them, it's great for the artist."

For some Benches on the Avenue artists, like father/son team Rick and Lucas Villarreal, creating the benches has become a fun family project. Together they created the "Animal Paradise" bench that sits in front of Subway restaurant.

“(My son) actually did it – he drew a little design and incorporated all these animals before I could even submit anything,” Rick said. “I liked it so much I was like, you know what, let’s go for it.”

Artist and musician Devin Parker also found a fun way to involve his children in the creative process. Although Parker built the “Pandas in the Park” bench by himself, his kids were a big inspiration.

“I design everything, usually in the computer,” he said. “My kids kind of art-directed and leaned over my shoulder and told me where pandas should go and where they shouldn’t go.”

The ‘Benches’ program starts long before any artwork actually appears on Oak Park Avenue. Early in the year, members of the Marketing Commission meet to vote on one of usually three or four possible themes. Once that’s settled, the Village issues a call to local artists through its website, social media and Community Email.

Interested artists are asked to submit two ideas, and members of the Village’s Marketing Commission again convene to vote on the best designs. The selected artists then get a small stipend for supplies and spend months constructing the benches, which are installed along Oak Park Avenue in May.

“It’s a long process that takes months, but the end result is worth it,” Program Coordinator Joanne Carroll said. “The artists love doing them, and the public loves seeing them. It’s great for everyone involved.”

Spend just a few moments with any of this year’s Benches artists, and it’s easy to see why they’re so passionate about creating art.

“It’s very cathartic,” said artist Alexander Howard, who crafted the “Madagascar” bench with friend and former student Blake Kitching. “It’s a way to escape the everyday regular humdrum. I’m a technical artist, so it’s not often you get to branch out and do something that’s a little bit more creative.”

“I think it’s so cool that Tinley Park has this kind of outlet and invites creativity,” artist Michael Trapp, creator of the “Swamp Life” bench, said. “I know people travel from all around to come see these things, so it’s fun to be able to contribute to that.”

Artist Amy Frale, who created the “Hidden in Plain Sight” bench with friend and fellow art teacher Carla Zidek, said she gets inspiration from the other artists in the program.

“I love seeing all the other benches,” she said. “I think it’s super inspiring to see what everybody else came up with using the same theme. There’s a lot of satisfaction seeing it on the Avenue.”

Whether it swims in the sea, walks on land or soars through the air, Oak Park Avenue in Downtown Tinley Park is the place to be this summer for those looking to get up close and personal with all kinds of creatures. But don’t worry – you won’t need a hang glider or scuba gear to go on this particular Animal Adventure ... all you’ll need is a few friends, a camera and your imagination!

Learn more today at www.TinleyPark.org/Benches, where you can see this year’s brochure and watch videos of many of the artists. Come on out and see why the Benches on the Avenue program is the talk of the town!