

Whimsical woodcarving class inspires students at Multnomah senior center

By Polina Olsen
The Southwest Portland Post

Leroy Nollette carves three-dimensional doodles. “I call them drudles; they’re a conversation piece” he said as he selected the perfect tool from his set. And, conversation moved along non-stop at the Neighborhood House Senior Center’s woodcarving class along with choice projects tailored for each student’s taste.

Today, some students munched sandwiches as they talked and worked. Others opted for the Senior Center lunch. Instructor Cris McBride walked around the room chatting with everyone.

“I started relief carving in 1988,” she said. “I had tendinitis in my arms so I figured I’d strengthen them myself by carving. Once you’re a woodcarver, you carve everything, even avocado pits. It’s a good thing I have a gas fireplace – I don’t burn anything.”

McBride teaches four times each week including a class at Portland Community College. She spends weekends at shows and seminars. “Most of my classes are two to three hours,” she said. “Lots of students come to socialize. I have one student who comes to class every week. He doesn’t need any help but it’s the only time he finds to carve.”

McBride specializes in small, whimsical figurines that often inspire her students. She brought boxes of them to class today. One caught Santa Claus headfirst down a chimney with his feet sticking out. Animals, whistles and carved gnomes dominated. “I sell the blanks and patterns,” McBride said. “I don’t sell the carvings – my family would kill me.”

A young man who joins the class walked over with his latest gnome. “Do

you want to dry brush now?” McBride asked. “You paint against the grain.” Brandon Thomas started carving at Portland Community College and wanted to make furniture until he met McBride at an Expo Center show. Today, he’s finishing “Buford” whom he described as “a guy covered in hair.”

Ann Safley, who drives over from Clackamas, worked diligently on a small turtle. She had trouble rounding the back and asked for instruction in-between cuts. “Chris is a master teacher,” she said. “If you’ve never carved before you’ll learn basic cuts and how to handle tools, and you’ll go home with a finished product.”

“I did a turtle rescue camp in Mexico,” she continued, explaining her ongoing interest. “In six days, we released 7990 hatchlings. We take them out on the beach at sunset.” Safley, who retired about two years ago, chatted about kayaking during the trip. “We were in Crocodile water,” she said. “I was disappointed I didn’t see any.”

With each student working on individual projects, the time hummed by. Ann Paes, hoping to attract bees to her apple trees, copied a bee goddess from the British Museum’s collection. Her friend, Dorine Olsson, makes Santas for her grandchildren and wooden whistles that she donates to a senior center sale in Salem.

Jeanne Hebblethwaite, a former oncology nurse, carves young relatives into reliefs. “I carved my great-nephew playing basketball,” she said. “My great niece likes turtles so I made a turtle for her, and a dancer.”

Meanwhile, LeRoy Nollette fine-tuned his drudle. “I also make snowmen,” he said. And, he takes a class with his grand-



Instructor Cris McBride (left, checked shirt) chats with Ann Safley over some favorite figurines. (Post photo by Polina Olsen)

son at Gaston High school. “I was invited to participate. I’m learning more than all the kids put together. You learn something new every week.”

About Neighborhood House Senior Center

Designed for people 55 and up, the Neighborhood House Senior Center offers programs ranging from senior law and meditation to computers, qigong and bingo. Last year their many outings included the Nutcracker ballet and a visit to Moonstruck Chocolates. Membership costs \$20 per year per individual or \$30 per couple, with extra charges for some activities.

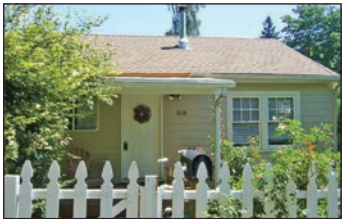
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LeRoy Nollette finishes up a doodle as Ann Hebblethwaite (rear) carves a nephews image into wood. (Post photo by Polina Olsen)

visit www.nhweb.org or e-mail aging@nhweb.org. Newsletters with the class schedules and upcoming activities are available online at <http://www.nhweb.org/programs/aging-senior-center.shtml>. You will need Adobe Acrobat to read the newsletters. Get it free at <http://adobe.com/products/reader>.

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