

BLOOMING ARTISTS

OCF Youth Booth craft guild nurtures artistic expression BY VANESSA SALVIA

While much of the scenery at the Oregon Country Fair looks like it sprouted magically from the forest floor, a surprising amount of intention and purpose goes into creating it. Even civil disobedience, it could be said, has its place in creating the environment you experience there.

Though she now lives in Trabuco Canyon, Calif., Sandra Brown returns to Eugene each summer for Fair. Brown is the craft inventory coordinator of the Youth Booth. Twenty-five years ago, when she was 21, she went to the Fair for the first time with friends who had a booth. She operated Red Tail Farm, growing organic produce, and eventually started working with and trading produce to the kitchen crew. At that time, under the big oak tree along the Kids Loop was a little rickety booth affectionately known as “the lemonade stand.”

“It was short and it had windows that faced the path right in front of the Kids Loop playground,” recalls Brown. Her two boys, Cerin and Cory — along with some other kids they knew — became inspired to clean up the little shack and start using it like it was their own booth.

The next year, 8-year-old Cerin found an old mirror and threw it out of the upstairs window of their barn at home. “He said he wanted to make pocketbook-sized mirrors surrounded with Fimo clay and sell them at the Country Fair,” Brown says. “I said not to throw mirrors around! If that was what he wanted to do we would go to the art store.” At that year’s Fair, Cerin and Cory brought their mirrors and sold them out of that tiny shed, along with a handful of other kids who had brought items.

Brown became the “booth parent,” sitting with the kids while they sold their crafts. But one day, craft inventory pathrovers realized the kids were selling art at a booth that had not been juried in by the OCF board, and told them to pack up and leave.

“The kids started to get upset,” Brown remembers. “They didn’t know what to do. One of the kids started crying and yelling. I said, ‘You don’t have to leave, you don’t have to get upset and get belligerent. This is civil disobedience. You can tell them, ‘I believe I have a right as a child whose parents work at the fair to sell a craft, and this is the kids’ area and I believe you’re wrong and I’m going to stay.’”

“So the kids looked at them and said, ‘We’re going to stay,’” Brown continues, “and they put their stuff back. Then the craft inventory people got on their radios and said, ‘We’ve got a problem! These kids aren’t leaving and they’ve got an adult leader who says they don’t have to leave.’”

The kids were allowed to continue using the booth that year, but were told they had to get approval from the board to return. At their presentation to the board, many of the kids came along to show support and most wrote letters explaining why they thought the booth was a good idea.

In 2000, the Youth Booth was given official approval. Brown says she understood that OCF expected some kind of supervision and rules to follow, as well as a record of what was taking place at the booth. Kids were putting out blankets and selling things like beer caps as the public walked by. “That wasn’t cool,” she says, “so I think the Fair was legitimately trying to make it not look like vagrant kids selling garbage.”



Crafts made by kids to sell at the Youth Booth

People at the board meeting said that Brown was corrupting the kids by turning them into “little capitalists.” Brown strongly disagreed. “It’s part of what they learn, that they have to buy art supplies and think about their time and the amount of value that’s in their art. One of the things I help them do is set a price for their art,” she says. “This is an art fair and the kids want to express themselves. They’re basically making money to spend at the fair, so they can go out and buy themselves a kaleidoscope or a burrito. We are an alternative community, and we have to learn how to make money and have some kind of legitimacy and income, and some of us are trying to do that through art. For the kids, it’s part of learning how to be artists.”

Over the years, the booth has provided space for kids ranging in age from 4 to 18. The younger ones might sell crayon drawings or do facepainting, some kids have written poetry or offered palm readings, while others have made magnets decorated with a wood-burning tool. “Simple things,” says Brown. “All kinds of jewelry. Two brothers used to collect rocks and tumble them to polish them.”

For kids whose parents have a Fair booth, there is some infrastructure allowing them to take over the booth from their parents, or if they want to sell a different craft they can be juried in as a returning — rather than a new — crafter. None of this is available to kids whose parents are not crafters but who contribute on work crews. By becoming part of the Youth Booth, kids turning 18 have an opportunity to be considered a returning crafter.

Brown never knows how many kids will show up each year or what they will bring. She decorates the space, provides shade and makes sure the kids are always supervised. An average of 90 kids use the booth every year — some young ones may only hang out an hour or so at a time. Only twice has Brown nixed crafts that kids wanted to sell — one no-no was pipes, and another was “boffers,” or sticks wrapped in foam used as mock weapons.

Brown’s boys, Cerin and Cory — who were there at the booth’s inception — are now in their 20s and can’t sell their own art anymore. These days they help supervise the booth and are poised to take it over from their mother. “They’re starting to think of what they might want to do that’s different,” Brown says. “They’re thinking about having a tiny stage in the back and inviting kids to play music there for ambience.”

Brown sees other opportunities and experiences that the booth provides. Kids have to learn to work through emotions such as greed or envy, bring their supplies from home, manage their time and money, and share their experiences with their peers, while at the same time helping younger kids follow in their footsteps. All of this ultimately builds their character as a part of a community that values expression and freedom.

A year after being accepted by the board, the old lemonade stand was torn down and replaced by a new booth with a long counter to share, a good-sized bench to sit on and a wooden sun backdrop. As the “youth crafts guild” became more popular, the booth was relocated to a bigger space across the path. Visit the Youth Booth at L78. **EW**

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