



Sam Cowan, 9, paints rocks outside his home in Warrenton.

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ing groups often starts with finding a rock and looking up the Facebook group.

But Daniel Varozza started creating rocks of art long before the Facebook group “Astoria Rocks” was formed.

“Over the years I think I’ve probably done 1,500 rocks that I’ve put out,” said Varozza, who lives in Astoria.

Four years ago, when his son, Vinny, was 2, Varozza picked up some rocks on their daily walk home. He started drawing and painting the rocks until his son looked at one and said “Easter egg?”

That’s what gave Varozza the idea to take the rock out and hide it. While out walking, they would pick up another rock to paint and hide it outside. Varozza then started the Facebook group “DV’s Painted Rocks.”

Recently, Varozza painted a rock as a Volkswagen Bug for an auction to raise money for a friend whose wife was injured in a car accident. “I didn’t have any money to help him out,” Varozza said.



Sully Cowan, 4, holds up a freshly painted rock.

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A painted rock found by Misty Phillips, of Astoria. COURTESY MISTY PHILLIPS

His rock sold for \$45. Later that night, it was used in a raffle to raise additional money. “That was probably one of my most memorable ones,” Varozza said.

### A spirit of sharing

Misty Phillips, of Astoria, said some group members’ competitiveness — the drive to find rocks and post them on Facebook — began to diminish the spirit of Astoria Rocks.

Eventually, rock hunters started watching and following Mindy Bizzell to find freshly hidden treasures.

“I became a little disillusioned at one point,” Bizzell said, “because it was supposed to be about kindness and art, and I really wanted just strangers to find them.”

Astoria Rocks should be about sharing, she said. As 2017 ended, Bizzell stepped away from the group. “I needed to focus on my kids,” she said.

But Astoria Rocks continues to grow. Members post on the Facebook page just about every day.

Member Brianna Horton, an artist and stay-at-home mom, said, “Astoria is such a unique place, and has an appreciation for art here, that I feel like ‘Astoria Rocks’ will thrive.”

A Helena, Mont., resident, Lexsey Carpenter, still holds on to the rock she and her husband found while honeymooning on the Oregon Coast. They found it while enjoying morning coffee on a bench near Astoria’s Cannery Pier Hotel.

The rock — obviously painted by a child, with a solid green background and a purple flower on top — was among the few mementos they took home.

Carpenter has brought the Astoria Rocks spirit home to Helena and engages her youth ministry in painting and hiding rocks around their town.

“It’s really good community outreach,” she said. “And it’s a good way to get involved.” 