



It's the next wave in art

SAND SCULPTORS TURN BELMAR'S BEACH INTO GAUDY GALLERY

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BELMAR — You, too, can sculpt a 5-foot-tall Godzilla using nothing but beach sand, salt water and a little creativity.

Just ask Chuck Feld. The professional sand artist said the key to building stunning sand castles and other works of beach art is just starting with a good base of well-packed sand and letting creativity be your guide.

"What's the hardest part?" Feld, 56, of West Chester, Pa., said. "I guess, if it's low tide, carrying the water."

Feld and fellow sand sculptor Bill Cichone were more than up to the challenge Wednesday morning as they spent nearly six hours carving a beach bum Godzilla — a lounging lizard sporting a baseball cap, suntan lotion and flip-flops — crushing a small sand castle along Belmar's shoreline.

Godzilla and his sand-flecked creators were far from alone. An estimated 10,000 spectators packed the beachfront between 17th and 20th avenues Wednesday as competitors shoveled and sculpted their way through the 19th annual New Jersey Sandcastle Contest.

Judges sorted through 300 entries, and prizes were awarded in six categories based on creativity, resourcefulness, originality and accessorizing.



SpongeBob in a skirt

The Renner family's colorful rendition of SpongeBob SquarePants — a 15- to 20-foot-long model complete with a wavy hula skirt — had a good deal of each of those traits.

But Victoria Renner, the 10-year-old Belmar resident who sketched a drawing of the cartoon character as a blueprint for Wednesday's event, was most impressed with the blasts of fluorescent color she and her friends added to their creation.

"It makes it look real bright, it makes it look more real," she said.

The secret source for that eye-popping color? Ground chalk.

"We didn't want to use anything that wasn't good for the environment," said her mother, Vickie Renner, 49. "It's our trade secret."

Renner said she and her family have developed a pretty successful sand castle-building strategy in the six or seven years they've taken part in the event. They decide, in advance, on a simple shape — an American flag or a huge sun, perhaps — then stake out their area, build a well-packed, slightly moistened base, and start carving away.

One way to make the sand art seem even larger, Vickie Renner said, is to dig a gully around it to create the illusion of height and depth. The Renners' effort paid off with second place in the family category.

Their approach was taken a step further by another group of Belmar residents, who built a fortified castle with a spiraling ramp that brought colored paddle balls from the top of a tower down to a nearby reservoir.

"We kind of thought, 'Let's do something different this year,'" said Mark D'Angelo, 23, as he and his friends used plastic tools and a putty knife to carve the side of their highly functional sand castle. "We thought (it would) be cool to have working parts, something to catch your eye, something to separate us from everyone."

D'Angelo and his friends have been competing in the contest for about 12 years and are constantly devising ways to improve on past performances.

"We just like to try to come up with really creative ideas," D'Angelo said. He and his friends took first place in the category for ages 16 and older.



She uses her head

Though her sand art wasn't as intricate, Erin Austin definitely got points for originality. The 11-year-old Roxbury resident breathed life into the sandy octopus she built with her stepmother and others by actually becoming part of it.

"I offered (to do this)," said Austin, as only her head poked out of the colorful sand around her shaped like an octopus' arms. "(My stepmother) wanted to go, but I said I wanted to."

Austin's stepmother said the slightly overcast weather actually was a blessing in disguise for them.

"If the sun was out, she'd die under that," joked Kathy Austin, 33, of Belmar.

Rich Majoros visited the sand castle contest during his lunch break. The Avon resident, camera in hand as he stood on the Belmar boardwalk, said he was anxious to show shots from the event to co-workers at the Asbury Park motor vehicle inspection station.

"They don't believe that things like this happen," said Majoros, 57.

Feld and Cichone didn't seem to mind the attention. As beachgoers with cameras documented the duo's progress in building their sand art, Cichone casually reflected on what he's learned in his four years of sand-sculpting.

"A lot of times, it keeps changing as you go along," said Cichone, 52, of Bridgewater, as he used an aluminum Snapple can to make circular imprints on the ground near Godzilla's flip-flops. "You've got to be in control of how you cut things in. That's where patience comes in."

For Feld, a Pennsylvania native who didn't visit a beach until he was 30, the site of a sand sculpture taking form taps into memories of his own childhood.

"When I was a little boy, (my mother said) "Chuck, get out of the sandbox, you'll never amount to anything,"" said Feld.

Then again, she never met Godzilla.

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