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'Phoenix Bear' rises up from pond mud

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Thursday, August 13, 2009

EASTHAMPTON - City artist John Casey Douglass said he knew he was close to the line when he sunk a piece of art he calls "Phoenix Bear" in Nashawannuck Pond Wednesday night. He hoped he wasn't crossing the line, though.

Created by Douglass with the same mold used for the Bear Fest fiberglass bears, "Phoenix Bear" is a symbol of immortality, he said. The Phoenix - a mythical bird connected with resurrection, healing and peace - is consumed by flames, only to rise from the ashes. It is traditionally associated with rebirth.

Douglass spent 80 hours crafting "Phoenix Bear," which was to symbolically rise from the pond, to represent the rebirth of Bear Fest. The festival is a four-month public arts exhibit in which 33 fiberglass bears adorn downtown storefronts, sidewalks and front lawns.

Douglass said he intended to "shed new light to the energy and attention of Bear Fest" because he believes lately the Bear Fest buzz is more about the two stolen bears and bearnapping attempts than the exhibit itself.

"The idea is Chrome Bear and the other (stolen) bear can't be killed," the local artist and restaurant owner said. "You can't kill a Phoenix it rises from the ashes."

Douglass said he sank "Phoenix Bear" Wednesday around 10 p.m. About nine hours later, police officer Alan Schadel spotted the gold bear with wings, feathers and a beak. He reported the finding around 7:30 a.m. Thursday, according to Police Captain Donald Emerson.

"The city owns the pond; You really can't put things on city property without permission," Emerson said. "We're city officials so we had to remove it."

Emerson noted the department is not pressing any charges against Douglass.

Department of Public Works employees used a backhoe to remove the bear, which is now stored in the Department of Public Works.

"I thought it might be short-lived; I didn't realize it'd be that short-lived," Douglass said. "It's a shame that it couldn't have been viewed as something of value. Instead it was treated as a nuisance and a piece of garbage."

Douglass said he planned to donate the bear to Easthampton City Arts.

City Arts



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATRICK BROUGH

A member of the Easthampton Department of Public Works tries to pull "Phoenix Bear" from Nashawannuck Pond with a few ropes Thursday morning. The department needed a backhoe to remove the bear.



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Police called Bear Fest coordinator Briana Taylor early Thursday morning to inform her of the incident. She said the stunt is independent of Easthampton City Arts, which hosts Bear Fest.

"We don't have an opinion about it," Taylor said.

This was not the first Easthampton City Arts heard of Douglass' idea. In January the Bear Fest jury reviewed about 130 bear proposals, including Douglass' proposal to sink a white bear in the pond. The jury rejected it.

"A bear sunk in the pond is not going to benefit us... we won't be able to auction it off," said Taylor. The bears are set to be auctioned in October to benefit local arts programs and city schools.

"It would have been damaged and not appealing to somebody to spend a couple of thousand dollars on," she said. "I hate to say it's like a business but when people are giving you money they want to see the benefits of their sponsorship."

The jury did approve Douglass' proposal for "Astronaut Bear" which hangs outside the entrance of Apollo Grill, Douglass' restaurant in the Eastworks Building.

Unbeknownst to City Arts, Douglass had fashioned "Astronaut Bear" out of materials of his own making, keeping the \$900 fiberglass bear aside for sinking purposes.

It is undecided whether Easthampton City Arts will auction "Astronaut Bear" - not made from the standard mold - in October, Taylor said. Douglass received the \$500 stipend for creating "Astronaut Bear."

Douglass had planned to sink the bear last month, anticipating that the bear would be revealed this month as water levels lower in the pond for a dredging project, but when City Arts heard about the plan, organizers asked Douglass to return it.

Douglass returned the bear, but was unhappy.

"I wasn't trying to draw attention to myself as an artist, I was trying to draw attention to the success of the Bear Fest," Douglass said.

In the end, he borrowed a bear mold from another Bear Fest artist, who had stored his mold in a closet. Taylor said there were no rules regarding the molds, but "it wasn't in our plans to just lend the molds to anybody to make copies."

Douglass says he wants to push Easthampton City Arts.

"It's very safe community public art," Douglass said. "Are we just going to be an arts and crafts place or are we going to have elements of boundary-pushing creative arts. Out of the ashes of this project may come a secondary arts community."

Taylor said while the organization supports what she called "edgy art," it must honor its Bear Fest mission. "Performance arts has its place but this wasn't the forum for it," Taylor said. "It's unfair to say we're safe or too conservative," Taylor said. "We've only just begun - we don't know what the future holds."

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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Comments

Fri, 08/14/2009 - 10:47 — [HampTaxPayer](#)

[They should have left it](#)

I would have loved to have seen it, and so would my children. I would have driven to Easthampton to look at it, and probably would have gone out to eat while I was there. Oh well. Its too bad the city viewed it as garbage, and not the beautiful, eye catching piece of art that it was. It would have brought in a whole new slew of Bearfest goers. You view Bearfest simply as a fundraiser- we view it as entertainment. I think Phoenix Bear was well thought out and very appropriate.

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Fri, 08/14/2009 - 10:39 — bronwen

ECA had no involvement in

ECA had no involvement in yesterday's incident with the Phoenix Bear.

I just posted this on the masslive easthampton forum, but it seems relevant here too.

Some points about the Bear Fest, to hopefully help clarify things:

It was a juried competition. Artists from all over wmass submitted proposals to decorate one of 35 bears. The winning artists were chosen by a jury made up of local people in the arts community. The bears, which are the property of ECA, were decorated as per the winning artists proposals. This was a contractual agreement between the artists and ECA. This is important point because the end goal of the fest is to auction the bears to raise money for our schools, Riverside Industries, and ECA. It was also important for the chosen artists to stay within the parameters of the project because there are local business sponsors involved, many of whom sponsor a particular bear, i.e. they graciously donated money to the project and "chose" specific bears for their sponsorship (you can see the sponsor names on plaques on the logs).

Pond Bear, while an innovative and exciting idea (by someone who himself has done alot for our city), was not one of the chosen proposals, and per the terms of the many contractual agreements, ECA had no choice but to ask for the return of the bear. Yesterday's incident had no involvement by ECA, and ECA had no say in what happened to the Phoenix Bear. The decisions to remove it were made by the police and DPW.

ECA has done wonderful things for the city, and the Bear Fest has been fabulously successful. (hasn't it been just wonderful to see so many people visting our town to see ther bears!). It's been a large project, and with any large project with a lot of people involved, there are bound the be a few mis-understandings and mis-communications. On both sides of the Pond Bear incident are good people with similar aims to bring more art and excitement to the city. Let's move past this incident, and chalk it up to mis-understandings, and continue to celebrate the Bear Fest and all the people and things that make our wonderful little city unique.

I hope this helps clarify things a little bit.

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Fri, 08/14/2009 - 09:20 — Imdouglass

phoenix bear

I think the "arts" committee takes themselves too seriously. Why squash creativity? Play by their rules or don't play at all? The Phoenix bear was not owned by them, why do they have anything to do with it at all?

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Fri, 08/14/2009 - 09:17 — Donna

Phoenix Bear

What the picture shows is a very beautiful bear. I think that it is an appropriate idea. Not only for the BearFest but also the Pond. They are trying to clean up the pond for future use - a phoenix rising from the mud. What better way to bring it all together than to have a beautiful bear rising out of the muddy waters. I think it's true that the BearFest is slowing and maybe if they would put the bear near the pond where it was found would revibrate the BearFest. It is true that more people are thinking about the stolen bears and the Phoenix Bear might just help bring back the interest to the BearFest and diminish slightly the city's latest problems with cats, senior and the stolen bears.

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