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'KIND OF A PUZZLE'

Mini tree houses provide way to explore area parks

By GARY SEMAN JR.

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It's been likened to a scavenger hunt for those who love the outdoors, part of the fun being the thrill of the chase.

The Columbus Recreation and Parks Department has launched "Find me in the Park: It's TREEmendous," a summerlong program in which five artists were commissioned to build small, decorative tree houses in Whetstone, Goodale, Schiller, Westgate and Wolfe parks. They will be on display through Sept. 20.

It's a variation on the Tiny Door Project, sponsored by Keebler Foods Co., which conducted a 21-market campaign last year meant to inspire the imagination of children and their parents.

Small houses were placed in the crooks of trees at Schiller, Whetstone and Bicentennial parks as part of the effort. They were removed last September.



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This decorative tree house by Sharon Dorsey is one of many created by five artists that have been placed in Whetstone, Goodale, Schiller, Westgate and Wolfe parks.

"Last year, we had such a success with the Tiny Door Project, we decided we wanted to branch off of it and continue with the fun," said Terri Leist, assistant director of the recreation department.

Artist Sharon Dorsey spent about 40 hours completing her piece, which is about 2 feet tall and 18 inches wide.

Dorsey, who works at Open Door Art Studio in Grandview Heights, said the work was complicated but inspiring. For the sake of participants, she would not reveal the location of her artwork.

"The concept of the actual piece and the construction of the actual piece -- it's kind of a puzzle," Dorsey said. "You can think about what you want it to look like, but when you start work on it, you come across all of these challenges on how you put the pieces together."

She also came up with a tale about her project.

The creatures who dwell in the house are squirrdinals -- a cross among squirrels, cardinals and humans - that were a side project created by a brilliant scientist, Mortimer Crum.

Crum was a gifted biogeneticist who was contracted by the Germans in 1938 to begin a cloning and gene-splicing project. He started his research in his home laboratory with the local squirrels and birds of his native area, with the expectation of trials with humans by 1940.

When World War II began, Crum grew uncomfortable with the arrangement and the expectations of the Germans. He broke the contract with the Germans, who responded by burning down his laboratory. Crum died in the fire, but the squirrdinals were able to fly away and find shelter in Ohio's parks.

Leist said the objective was to get people in the parks, increase awareness of trees, tap into residents' imaginations, create outdoor activities and feature artists in a public setting.

Artists, who had to qualify, were given \$1,000 each to cover design and building costs.

Maps of tree house locations can be found at branches of Fifth Third Bank, which is the sponsor, and through a geocaching app.

Leist said tiny logs are located at the foot of the trees where participants can leave notes.

The tree houses, meanwhile, were installed out of the reach of park visitors.

"We purposely put them high enough where they're not reachable, but they're seeable," Leist said.