

Let it snow coconut



ABOVE: Coconut and candy canes deck out entry in library's Gingerbread House Competition.

Adult category winner Manna Robertson created the Old Capitol out of gingerbread in the library's contest. LEROY COLLINS LIBRARY



Frosting, jelly beans cement gingerbread house winners

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No matter the recipe or technique — whether pre-assembled kit or homemade — the second annual Gingerbread House Competition at the LeRoy Collins Leon County Public Library was one to remember.

Some Tallahasseeans built entire towns from cookies and confectionery. Others paved their walkways with jelly beans. Some paths diverged in a coconut snow wood, and went the cinnamon-y, crunchy cereal route. One participant took the ultimate Floridian approach and strung up gingerbread boat sails with fruit leather candies.

“It’s really interesting to see people’s creativity come to life,” says co-organizer

Amy Tipler, an information professional at the library. “We know it is also a morale booster for a lot of people too, especially during this time when things are so hard for everyone. It’s great to be able to see that come to light.”

Tipler and her colleagues Michelle Ray and Alicia Durham were all pleasantly surprised by the amount of engagement they saw from the community this holiday season. Four years ago, the competition was a staff only event that raised money for school supplies and other local charities. Tipler won that first year with her beach house populated with gummy bears.

Last year’s event took place in conjunction with their holiday children’s programming. This year, they pivoted to a virtual competition, and asked com-



Manna Robertson

munity members to submit photos of their finished creations. They received 37 submissions in the child, teen, adult categories.

All houses were guest judged by County Commissioner Kristin Dozier, local chef Leon Brunson, and COCA’s Assistant Director, Amanda Karioth Thompson. The first place houses were announced Dec. 14, and included adult category winner Manna Robertson who constructed a familiar city icon.

“The Old Capitol building is the first thing I think about when I think about Tallahassee,” says Robertson, 18, and a freshman graphic design major at the University of Florida. “It’s a pretty, his-

toric landmark that is recognizable, so I thought it’d be good for the contest.”

Robertson made the best of her self-isolating quarantine when she was sent home from UF for two weeks after coming into contact with a classmate who had COVID-19. She grew up in Tallahassee, and was a frequent library user as well as amateur cake baker. After seeing the competition listed on Facebook, she knew how she planned to spend her unexpected two weeks at home.

First, she pored over photos of the capitol building and created custom baking templates. Then, she used her design skills to paint the facade from the front of the building in food coloring and royal icing, and even used a bowl to create the

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Contest

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iconic dome shape in cookie-form.

“I used a lot of my creative thinking that art has given me over the years to figure out what elements to use to make it aesthetically pleasing,” says Robertson. “I wanted to bring in elements from Florida into the design, too, so I included palm trees and the Florida flag in icing and candy.”

The Leon County Juvenile Detention Center submitted a house that won in the teen category. JDC teacher, Lynn Jones, is incredibly proud of her students’ teamwork and creativity. Jones has been an educator for 36 years. She often visits the library to see what programming she can incorporate with her lessons.

The library provided gift bags along with the competition this year which included a gingerbread recipe made by librarian Michelle Ray as well as several other goodies.

Tipler says over 240 community members picked up bags this year. When Jones came to gather bags for her students, she saw the competition as a great way to integrate her lesson on fairy tales, specifically “Hansel and Gretel.”

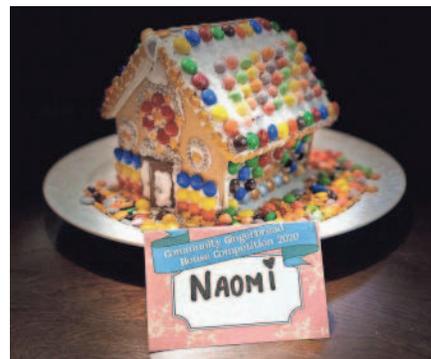
Eight students, aged 15 to 17 years old, completed the winning “Hershey’s” house which included gingerbread men and Hershey’s kisses on the roof. Jones often integrates the arts in her classroom and was impressed by one of her student’s decorating abilities. She says that student has aspirations to work in the Publix bakery. She has had past students go on to creative careers after JDC as professional singers and teachers.

“I like to make sure the students are prepared for life,” says Jones. “I do all I can to make sure that when my students leave my classroom, they have developed some goals. The important thing with this [competition] is that they knew it was part of the community.”

Jones is planning a holiday party at JDC for her students to celebrate the winners. Robertson plans to use her gift card prize to buy an iPad for her graphic design work at her upcoming internship for a nonprofit. She agrees with the unexpected benefits of this fun-spirited



An entry in the second annual Gingerbread House Competition at the LeRoy Collins Leon County Public Library. LEROY COLLINS LIBRARY



The second annual Gingerbread House Competition at the LeRoy Collins Leon County Public Library.

competition.

“It’s really encouraging to have something to work on,” says Robertson. “Competitions like this inspire and encourage people to be productive with their extra time and enjoy what they’re doing. You can be creative even in hard circumstances.”

To see more programming from the Leroy Collins Leon County Public Library, please visit <https://cms.leon-countyfl.gov/Library/Calendar/locationId/11>.

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org). This article is part of COCA’s Creativity Persists collection which highlights how our community uses the arts to stay connected and inspired during the COVID-19 pandemic.