



http://www.fairfaxtimes.com/articles/the-journey-to-create-althea/article_6bdd13ba-8453-11e7-b531-c717c05e7ba7.html

The journey to create Althea

By Janet Rems Special to The Fairfax County Times Aug 18, 2017



A site-specific, temporary public art installation, the 2017 sculpture, "Althea," is the fourth consecutive Lake Thoreau project in Reston spearheaded by the "STEAM Team"—a group of South Lakes High School students mentored by teacher, working artist and longtime Restonian Marco Rando.

PHOTO COURTESY MARCO RANDO

If you take a walk around Reston's Lake Thoreau, one of the first things you will likely notice is the intriguing and visually striking kinetic sculpture firmly tethered to the top of that lake's drably, utilitarian spillway. A site-specific, temporary public art installation, the 2017 sculpture, named "Althea," is the fourth consecutive project spearheaded by the "STEAM Team"—a group of South Lakes High School students mentored by teacher, working artist and longtime Restonian Marco Rando.

The theme of this year's sculpture, which will remain in place through November, is "all aspects of human rights," members of the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics) Team explained last week at a special program, "The Journey to Create Althea," hosted by Public Art Reston at the Reston Association (RA) headquarters.

Constructed from galvanized metal, plywood, wire rope and spray paint, its design consists of rings that randomly rotate in the wind. In the center ring is a generic kneeling figure. According to the students—11 from a team of two dozen—the rotating rings represent the evolving nature and complexity of human rights. In addition, the circles, which also resemble the orbital paths of the planets and electrons orbiting around the nuclei of atoms, symbolize "the connection of humanity to each other and the need to be aware of the world around us."

The sculpture's name "Althea" further references "the nature of healing" and "the importance of unity and compassion during difficult times." Derived from a Greek word meaning "wholesome," Althea also relates to the Greek verb "althos," which means to heal, and "Althaia," the Greek name for a plant believed to have healing powers.

Not all, however, was philosophical and aesthetic. Among the STEAM Team's practical considerations was ensuring that the installation would be properly engineered and constructed so it would be able to stand up to the high winds that occur on the lake and that its materials could endure the stresses of elements over time.

Veteran team member Carson Bush, a recent South Lakes graduate, was unabashed in his appreciation of the experience, enthusing “this was the defining thing of my high school years.”

Asked how it feels to touch so many lives with their public art work, student team leader Lucy Nguyen, also a recent South Lakes graduate, replied, “It’s a great feeling, satisfying, to hear what people think about it.”

Newer team member, rising South Lakes sophomore Morgan Ryan, summed up her experience in one word—“Awesome!”

Anne Delaney, executive director of Public Art Reston, in a later conversation, credited Reston resident James Pan with initiating the STEAM Team project at Lake Thoreau and Rando with working “countless hours” overseeing it. She recalled that Pan, who lives near Lake Thoreau, reached out to Public Art Reston and RA and proposed the lake’s unsightly spillway as a possible public art site. Pan, still a strong program supporter, also suggested the involvement of South Lakes students. While it started with only four students, the program, under Rando’s guidance, has not only grown substantially in participant numbers but also in sophistication.

Delaney explained: “What is unique about this project is that the STEAM Team has to go through the same process professional artists have to follow when they are selected to realize a public artwork in Reston. They have to present design concepts to Public Art Reston’s Public Art Committee and to the RA Design Review Board.”

The project, which enjoys widespread community support, is truly collaborative, Delaney further commented, noting it benefits from the guidance and support of family members as well as a variety of professionals— artists, engineers, welders, and RA staff.

In addition to Pan, among those who contributed their support this year were David Prochnow, a principal simulation modeling engineer with the Mitre Corp.; John I. Frankhouser III, a civil engineer and founding partner with ADTEK Engineers; designer Gaetano Rando; and artist and educator Rebecca Kamen, a professor emeritus at Northern Virginia Community College and a national leader of the STEAM education movement.

Once complete, the sculpture—which was first assembled in South Lakes’ parking lot where its stability and sturdiness also were tested—was transported to Lake Thoreau and installed by other essential project collaborators, RA crew members.

Equally, if not more, important, Delaney said, the STEAM Team included not only art students but students with other diverse interests and skills, such as math and science, who “may have never worked together if it was not for the project.”

Team member and recent South Lakes graduate Saeed Razavi, for instance brought his computer skills to the project by creating 3-D computer-generated models of the sculpture “to see how they’d look in the real world.”

Concurring that “math was essential,” Leah Moyer, another recent graduate, noted that a maquette of the sculpture, scaled to size, was created, too. “The engineers,” she granted, “kept us grounded, and there was lots and lots of mathematics.” A team member since she was a sophomore, Moyer’s family members also made key contributions. Her father Don and uncle Art Moyer did the welding during the fabrication process.

Nguyen also praised the constructive feedback the team received from its various collaborators. Applying that feedback during the evolving project’s many months of development, the team, she said, went through five different concepts before arriving on a final, workable design. That design also needed to be somewhat re-engineered during actual fabrication. “A lot of us came in as artists but the engineering and mathematics behind it became more important,” she admitted.

“Making it [physically] work was as important as our artistic concept,” Moyer agreed, noting that “a big part of the process was meeting six times with RA’s Design Review Board”—a process that has gotten more “comfortable” for team members over the years.

Asked if the temporary nature of their installation was upsetting, the students offered that, on the contrary, it added to the satisfaction of the experience. Moyer suggested, “It’s sad when it comes down, but I like that it’s constantly changing. ... I like seeing the next big thing.” Concurring, Bush added, “Like Leah, I like the excitement of what’s coming next. [The process] keeps moving faster and projects keep getting better and better.”

Besides Delaney, representatives of some of the project’s other partners took time to laud the STEAM Team’s efforts, too.

Team mentor Rando professed his “love” for the project, saying “I love working with the kids. I love it because I’m working alongside them. I learn along with them.” Hoping that the program would continue to grow, he said, “They do something very difficult, overcoming differences to collaborate. It’s not all apple pie all the time. They have to produce.”

Describing the annual STEAM program as a “great example of project-based learning,” Kim Retzer, South Lakes principal, said, “It is an honor to be part of this each year—although, she joked, I do none of the work.” She added, “This is where we should be going [in education] ... a real-world challenge, an experience that not all your peers have.”

Julie Bitzer, representing the RA board of directors, enthused, “You brought together your individuality but came together as one. It just gives me shivers. I’m so proud of you.”

Summarizing the overall feelings of those involved, Maggie Parker, chairman of Public Art Reston’s board, said, “What a remarkable accomplishment. ... You met all the challenges ... stepped up and delivered.”

The 2017 STEAM Team, including returning South Lakes alumni, were: Lucy Nguyen (team leader), Carson Bush, Leah Moyer, Jonathan Doctor, Josh Rodriguez (alumnus), Phoebe Liu, Mackenzie Krider, Samantha Busch, Catherine Lashley, Margaret Lashley (alumnus), Christian King, Victoria Slaski, Jefferson Frost (alumnus), Harrison Cahn, Amirah Kirwan, Saeed Razavi, Louis Razavi, Kimi Nacu, Darja Loidap, Lily Vogel, Morgan Ryan, Jeremy Southern, Yanis Gribi, and Isabella Emmons.

To View

- The site-specific, temporary public art installation, the kinetic sculpture “Althea” created by South Lakes High School’s STEAM Team for Reston’s Lake Thoreau, is visible from South Lakes Drive. A path that runs parallel to South Lakes Drive is accessible from the South Lakes Shopping Center.
- All four Lake Thoreau temporary public art sculptures are featured on Public Art Reston’s website and on Public Art Archive’s national database.