

Bonfire to send Katrina loss up in smoke

Artist helps revive Algiers holiday event

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Contributing writer

When the annual Algiers bonfire is ignited Dec. 3, it will offer more than toasty warmth and a kickoff to the holidays.

It will also offer up into the flames painful memories left by Hurricane Katrina.

Over the next week, the New Orleans Fire Department will build the structure to be set ablaze using 700 dresser drawers collected in the storm's aftermath by artist Jana Napoli.

When she returned to the city in October 2005, Napoli began collecting the drawers — sorrowful symbols of the loss of home, security and community, eventually assembling them into an exhibition titled "Floodwall." Napoli first built the towering mausoleum-esque display at the site of the World Trade Center in New York in 2007.

The drawers span 22 ZIP codes, with the exact address of each meticulously documented. Napoli recalled the first time she picked up a drawer, filled with the soggy memories mementoes of an anonymous and absent owner. In it she saw prayer sheets and baptism photos. In a moment of "messianic insanity" in response to the common proclamations that Katrina was a punishment cast on New Orleanians by the wrath of God, Napoli furiously asked out loud, "What did God not like about these people? What did God not like about this house?"

The art project grew out of her longing as an artist, Napoli said, to "make a picture of what silence looked like," and through that silence, to "speak of a city abandoned by government and demonized by pulpits all over the America."

Through her website, Napoli displayed a photograph of each drawer and requested that the owner contact her and tell their story.

"The bottom of a drawer is the most intimate place of a household," she said. "I went into the heart of people's lives. It was overwhelming."

Speaking Monday about the collection process, as she stood in front of a truck stacked with hundreds of the bubble-wrapped wooden artifacts, Napoli still choked back tears. But after lugging the drawers to exhibitions as far as Poland, Napoli knew it was time to let them go. She contacted New Orleans City Council President Jackie Clarkson, and together they initiated combining the reclaimed bonfire tradition with the celebration of a city reclaimed.

The return of the bonfire, hosted by the Algiers Economic Development Foundation and marking its second year since Hurricane Katrina, gave Napoli the perfect opportunity to release the sorrow attached to each unique drawer and the overall project.

"It's four and a half tons of material my body can't move or manage anymore," Napoli said, describing a dislocated shoulder sustained in Germany that illustrated the physical burden in addition to the emotional one. She has kept the drawer pulls and corresponding addresses, she said. "And the rest goes up."

Citing the partnership between the city, Fire Department, the Port of New Orleans and numerous sponsors, Algiers Economic Development Foundation President Chris Kane lauded the cooperation that continues to make the family-friendly event possible. The celebration features live music, activities for children, a riverboat parade featuring Santa and local cuisine.

The festivities, with Napoli's wall of drawers on a platform at the center, will take place Dec. 3 from 5 to 9 p.m. on the Algiers riverfront next to the ferry terminal.

"There is no longer silence in this city," Napoli said. "It's time to say goodbye to what was a very sad and painful time."



KARI DEQUINE / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Artist Jana Napoli created a display of 700 dresser drawers, with their soggy mementoes, found after Hurricane Katrina. They will be set ablaze at the Algiers holiday bonfire on Dec 3.