

# Marginal Arts Festival brings color, whimsy to a drab day

By Christina Nifong Special to The Roanoke Times | Posted: Saturday, March 29, 2014 9:29 pm

It rained on their parade — and their carnival, too.

But the show went on: The parade, smaller and in a steady drizzle. The carnival, indoors and less well-attended than last year.

The day was a downer of a way to end what had been a wide-ranging and boundary-pushing seventh annual Marginal Arts Festival, spanning six days, multiple locations and events from all over the artistic map.

But organizers made the best of it.

“It’s better than what the original predictions were,” said John McBroom, administrative director at Community High School, of the light rain rather than thunderstorms. Planners decided to move booths and stages off the lawn and into the school building rather than cancel the event altogether. “We’ve juggled everything,” he said.

At noon, Mayor David Bowers and parade marshal Sean Neff took their places behind the festival’s signature sculpted clown shoes on wheels. Bowers led the parade holding a rubber chicken on a stick.

A few sharp whistles sounded and the drums of the Norman Fishingtackle Choir set the marchers in motion.

Brightly colored umbrellas bounced among kids in gag glasses and top hats, playing pink plastic recorders. Grown-ups in monkey masks and hazmat suits mingled with wheeled papier-mache pineapples and elephants. Festival founder Brian Counihan, covered in a black jacket and holding an oversized head on a stick, gave the illusion of a giant loping amid the parade-goers. Counihan is an art teacher at Community High School, which sponsors the event and promotes it as a celebration of offbeat art.

A young girl dressed as a unicorn. A teen promenaded as a mermaid. A man wore a mask of sausage links made from pantyhose and



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The Marginal Arts Parade winds along Campbell Avenue in Roanoke, despite Saturday’s rain. The annual event celebrates art and the unusual.

stuffing. Another was lost in a bouquet of rainbow balloons; on his shoes he had glued the brightly colored foil wrappers of Cadbury chocolate eggs.

Spectators from the sidewalk were sparse. Many joined the parade as it moved down Campbell Avenue, past the construction at the farmers market, drawing restaurant diners and servers out for a brief peek. The heavy rain held off until the parade passed the rear of the Taubman Museum of Art and turned up the sidewalk, back to Community High School.

There, wet feet traipsed into the lobby of the school, whose ground floor had been transformed into a fairground. Kids wandered happily among face-painting and wood-making, hair-styling and paper-crafting booths. Young and old played games such as throwing rubber chickens through holes in an enormous, splatter-painted egg.

“Dad and son came last year and we didn’t come because we didn’t know what the deal was,” said Kim Karns, a mom with two young children. “But they had so much fun, we had to come back this year.”

Along with the booths, artistic events such as Community High School’s band and William Fleming High School’s step team, belly dancers and square dancers took over various school stages.

Though only about 200 people participated this year (down significantly from previous years), the carnival still boasted a mix not found at most school festivals: Elementary- and middle-school aged students from Community School, Community High School teens and teachers, Roanoke artists and activists and out-of-town artists who had participated in earlier Marginal Arts events all mingled in crowded hallways.

“It’s been a great week,” said Amy Herzel, a Roanoke artist whose “Meditations,” a series of pencil and paper drawings, opened Thursday at a downtown gallery in connection with the festival. “There’s such a wonderful arts community doing a great job at making things happen here.”

Organizers and participants said the Lycee workshops, which touched on subjects as varied as stress-reduction, vegetable fermentation, transportation planning and break dancing, were a hit. Another highlight of the week, said participants, was Ursonate, a live performance on Friday of nontraditional percussion and poetry.

“I love seeing the kids so excited about something so out of the ordinary,” said Community High School science teacher Jennifer Sosnowski, while sporting rubber chicken earrings and carrying a stuffed dinosaur in a teeny tiny black purse.

“They’re learning about subjects they would never stumble upon on their own.”