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Beach beauties

A sand-carving competition draws artists from far and near as
Revere Beach works to revitalize its image

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In the beginning, it looks more like a block than anything else, a block made of sand that has begun to crumble.

What happens next, at least to the uninitiated, is just short of magic. A sand sculptor looks at the block, sees something in it, and extracts it. For the past three years sculptors from all over the United States - and some from other countries - have performed this magic on Revere Beach. And they're doing it again this week.

In digging for their own visions, it turns out, they are also helping to produce another. Revere Beach, once known for its concessions and rides, is now a block of sand itself. It is a place, visitors say, that has improved in the past few years but has not been fully realized. These sculptors are part of the plan to remold it by creating a buzz, attracting people, and putting Revere back on the map.

The New England Sand Sculpting Festival is now in its

fifth year, and four of those have featured the sand sculpting competition in which 11 master sand sculptors are handpicked from the art form's small following and asked to create in front of Revere Beach crowds. This year, like those past, the sculptors have come prepared with boxes full of spatulas, straws, and feather dusters - their tools of the trade - to vie for the \$3,500 grand prize. Their world is a unique one, one full of glue-and-water solutions and specialized techniques.

Yesterday afternoon, Sandi Stirling of Ontario, knelt at the base of 10 tons of sand. An ode to love had appeared in her block; she called her creation "Embrace L'Amour." "I see it," she said. "It's just bringing it out."

She has until 4 p.m. today to finish.

Stirling has been sculpting since 1995 when boredom gave way to hobby on Sauble Beach, Ontario, when a sign called to her and told her about an upcoming sandcastle competition.

She took a trip to the library, checked out books about sand sculpting, and placed second out of 13. Her castle, she remembers, had a dragon wrapped around it.

"I've been doing it ever since," Stirling said. "It makes you feel good. It's relaxing. It's very therapeutic."

Stirling has been a competitor ever since the Revere Beach event began. She doubts she will place this year - if she did it would be a first. "If I win, that will be a bonus," she said. "And I'll accept gracefully."

As the sun beat down, Stirling was busy detailing some angel wings. Still, she took a break to visit with some fans. She walked up to the metal fence that separates the public from the sculptors and posed for a few pictures.

"She's the first one to talk to us," said Helen Whiting, 50, after Stirling had gone back to work.

"I think she's got personality," said Jackie Giguere, 56, Whiting's sister, "and I think her sculpture reflects her personality."

Giguere's birthday is coming up, so she got to choose the day's agenda. She had seen something about the Revere competition and decided they ought to spend the day on the beach. Otherwise, they said, they probably would not have set foot in Revere.

For Lillian Guido, the executive director of the Revere Beach Partnership, the sisters are just the beginning. The partnership, which puts on the sculpting festival, is dedicated to rediscovering the old Revere Beach, the one that Guido remembers growing up on.

"When I was young, it was the amusements, family-oriented area," she said. "Weekends you spent at the beach with your family."

Time, though, was not kind to Revere. It washed away its luster, she said, leaving it dirty and abandoned. That is slowly changing, in part, because of this contest.

"The city realized what they had," she said. "I don't think it's back yet. I think we could do a little bit more."

"It's starting to look better," said Matthew Martelli, the only local in the competition, as he worked on his own sculpture. "The beach is really nice."

Yesterday afternoon, he created a small gnarled creature emerging from a giant head. He called the sculpture "Off the Top of My Head." He said it really is. He has no design, no master plan; he is letting the sand guide him.

Normally, Martelli works with oil paints, but a friend got him hooked on the occasional sand sculpture several years ago. They had collaborated to make a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

As he smoothed out one of the creature's arms, a fracture formed at its wrist. He couldn't repair it. He picked up the sand-made appendage and threw it to the ground.

"Now," he said as he began to draw lines in the creature's chest, "the hand is right here."

"You've got to be able to adapt," he said, a lesson for himself and Revere.■