

Inflating Art and Spirits

by Laurie Mercer

When 3-year-old Morgan Moss watches her dad, Larry, put his vintage tuxedo jacket over his purple shirt, adjust it, and walk out, she knows I'm leaving her to go to work, and she really bawls," Moss says.

Moss, 34, usually makes people smile with his wildly inspired sculptures made entirely of balloons. While his work has earned him national proportions, setting world records and raising money for charitable causes.

"Balloons get attention, and they are fun," says Moss, of Henrietta, N.Y. (pop. 39,028), who was inspired as a child. "I was hooked," he recalls.

In 2000, Moss and a team of balloon artists fashioned 41,000 oblong balloons into two 25-foot-tall soccer players. Moss listed in the Guinness Book of Records for creating the world's largest non-round balloon sculpture. And in 2001, Moss and his team created a 20-foot-tall octopus sculpture. Their smiling octopus, made of 40,000 balloons, soared over Sodus Bay, near Rochester, N.Y., and eventually landed in the water.

Moss started twisting balloons when he was 10 or 11. By age 15 he was earning money creating balloon animals at parties. He attended college on tuition at the University of Rochester, where he earned a degree in computer science.

Once he started his computer career, however, he says he felt deflated working in a windowless office. In 1997, Moss quit his job and went into a career. Judy still calls those days her "contribution to the arts."

In 1992, Moss created the first website for balloon enthusiasts. By tapping interest in his performance art through social media, artwork and selling books, CD-ROMs and videos on the subject.

From the beginning, a non-profit group called Young Audiences of Rochester has hired Moss to perform his signature act. "A sculpture made entirely with balloons can 'catch' a teacher during a giggled-filled grand finale.

"There isn't a kid who can't learn from balloons and Moss," says Cathie Wright, Young Audiences' director of development.

Moss' balloon art also is used to infuse fun into charitable causes. Last Halloween, Moss helped raise nearly \$34,000 for a 20-foot, haunted but non-scary all-balloon house—with the Greater Rochester Jaycees, 400 volunteers and about a dozen balloons.

"He's amazing," says Kim Ziegler, the center's assistant director for special events. "Staff and volunteers can't wait to see him."

Visitors paid \$10 for the balloon mansion experience, and some were taken on a wheelchair-guided tour by Judy Moss.

Publicity from Balloon Manor led Moss to his next corporate assignment—again a message of hope. For an enthusiastic customer, Moss made a teddy bear—complete with bow and arrow—that he delivered to a nearby Ronald McDonald House, which provides shelter for homeless families.