

'Songs of my heart'

Hillsborough resident finds meaning in weaving baskets

By Ben Coley
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On a frosty Saturday morning, Susan Laswell proudly stands in front of her table at the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

The tabletop is filled with colorful baskets and imaginative figurines woven by Laswell's gentle fingers. Basket weaving is an art form that the 66-year-old has been perfecting since she was a child in Springfield, Illinois.

"When I was nine, I went to Girl Scout camp," said Laswell, recalling how she was introduced to basket weaving. "We had crafts, and I made a basket.

"And then, years later, I saw some people at a craft fair making baskets. I got interested in it, and I remembered how much fun it was. I bought some reed and started teaching myself how to do it."

There is more to Laswell's life than basket weaving. She graduated from Kansas State University with a degree in computer science. She has recently worked as a consultant recommending solutions for more effective computer systems.

Laswell said she loves her job, but basket weaving is her joy. She's even passed on the activity to her son and two daughters.

Sarah Corcoran, one of Laswell's daughters, has sold baskets with her mother since 2012. Corcoran said weaving is a way to be creative and spend quality time with her mom.

"I hope we are still weaving together for many years to come," Corcoran said. "I doubt that I will ever be as expert a weaver as my mother – weaving is in her blood."

Laswell has sold her woven art pieces for the past 30 years. She began to sell them regularly at the Carrboro Farmers' Market in 2002.

She calls her business "Heartsong Baskets" – a name that was inspired by a quote.

About Heartsong Baskets
For more information, visit
<http://www.carrborofarmers-market.com/new-page-46>.



Susan Laswell sells her creations at the Carrboro Farmers' Market on Jan. 31. Laswell has been weaving regularly since 1977 and has sold her art pieces at the farmers market for almost 14 years. (Staff photo by Ben Coley)

"It was an Indian woman, and she said, 'A basket is a song made visible,'" Laswell said. "And that just stuck in my brain. The American Indians normally have songs for everything – songs for gathering the materials they use, or even songs for weaving each kind of basket."

Laswell said the prices of the baskets range from \$30 to \$250. She added that the process of making a basket depends on its size and the intricacy of the pattern. It can take 30 minutes for the simplest baskets to 200 hours for a large, complex basket, she said.

She said the most common materials used to make baskets are rattan and reed, which are plants found in tropical regions and wetlands, respectively.

But Laswell doesn't always use those items. She said she once cut down a white oak tree in West Virginia to gather materials. She also crafted a basket made solely of photographs.

"Limitless as your imagination," Laswell said with a smile. "Anything that is long and flexible and can be woven, you can make into a basket."

For the past 12 years, Laswell has shared her creative genius by teaching basket weaving at the Carrboro Century Center on 100 N. Greensboro St. Her current class meets each Monday from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Laswell said basket weaving requires dexterity and hand-eye coordination, but she's never had a student who couldn't weave a basket.

Patti Spaulding, one of Laswell's students, said basket weaving is therapeutic and meditative.

Spaulding described Laswell as knowledgeable, patient and quick to give any assistance.

"(Laswell) can see a mistake from across the room!" exclaimed Spaulding, while stitching a basket in Laswell's class. "She fixes everything when we screw up."

Sharon Rider, another basket weaving student, echoed Spaulding's sentiment.

"Sharon! You missed a stitch there!" snickered Rider, doing her best impression of Laswell.

Spaulding said she discovered the class through the Carrboro Farmers' Market, where she saw Laswell's decorative creations for sale.

But Laswell said she isn't driven by profit. Whether it is selling baskets or teaching classes, she has maintained one goal – to weave from her soul.

"You do it because you love it," Laswell said. "These (baskets) are my babies. They're the songs of my heart."