Creating the Provençal Village

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Creating the Provençal Village

By Michele Devitt

The pictures of the University of Dayton’s Marian Library Provençal Village in the recent issue of Creche Herald tell part of the story. However, the best part of the story is unseen; it is about the volunteers who collectively spent hundreds of hours bringing the village to life. Sixteen dedicated volunteers under master engineer, Mike Foley created various parts of the scene.

Fr. Johann Roten and Mike (a former waterworks engineer) decided which scenes and buildings would be made to best display the 7-9 inch Santons. Mike designed the buildings to resemble those in the Provence region of France. After sketching his ideas, he made cardboard mock ups of each building. He decided what embellishments were needed for the village scene and which people to highlight. Harry, a retired UD math professor recruited by his wife Cecelia, (so he would have something to do!) has been our primary set designer and craftsman for 10 years. The two men framed and sided the buildings using donated wood. Harry used pictures from the Internet of church facades as inspiration as he designed decorative details including the church window and alcove for the statue of Mary. Our wood shop tools used were bequeathed to us by former volunteer, Don.

Steve, newly retired and recruited by his daughter, a Marian Library graduate student, began building sixteen 4'x4' “tables” for displaying the settings. Work space for all these tables and buildings was a challenge, but we used anywhere we could, including under our work tables. Because of its magnitude, this village became a daunting but exciting project as it grew each week.

Ann, a retired elementary teacher, consulted the Internet for directions on how to make miniature umbrellas, and Pat, a former nurse, began this difficult task. Much trial and error finally produced some colorful shade for the street sellers.

Michele purchased the right silk flowers, grape vine material and other greenery and miniatures. Several ladies worked with Anne, Stephanie and Lois (mother of 9, grandmother of 32, and great-grandmother of 9) to make grape vineyards. This tedious job involved trimming silk fabric leaves to just the right size and repainting grapes, that were as small as grains of rice. The vines were hot glued to mini trellises and we tried to laugh not cry when we hot glued grapes to our fingers.

Ann O. took the 208 figures home to carefully clean, iron and freshen their clothes. She was also involved with making roof tiles. We started fabricating tiles of clay, but they didn’t all dry flat enough. Once we realized how many square inches we needed we ended up purchasing plastic doll house roofing, cutting and painting it.

Mary Ellen, 88 and working through illness, used her professional painting skills to add detail to building entrances, to paint rocks, a small lake and other fine details in the Village. Weezie, our senior volunteer at 90 years young, sewed miniature curtains for the buildings from our stash of donated laces and fabrics. Mike’s wife Michele F, a Marian studies masters graduate, research assistant, and long-time volunteer cut and laid Styrofoam bricks, walls, and paths. She became Mike’s right hand person and painted buildings, made curtains and a miniature banner. In addition, she did final assembling of the grand setting with Mike and Fr. Roten.

Setting up the Village took hours of precise assembly as the final three 12′x16′ tables support 10 scenes. Final trips to craft stores for decorative embellishments added the last of the special touches. Sr Jean and Sr Michaela ironed 102 feet of cloth skirting for the tables. Ann, our student worker, photographed it all to keep our records updated.

This Provençal Village is a testament to the fun work we do as a year-round group of volunteers. On most Tuesdays we gather to do the Lord’s work in creating and maintaining a wonderful creche collection. During lunch, we catch up with everyone, and this supportive group is always fun to be with. The Provençal village of Santons, is also a memorial to Fr. LaCasse. It will remain in our museum until February 2017, so if you can plan a trip to Dayton we would love to give you a tour.

(Editor’s note: the lack of last names in the above is a testament to the workers’ humility not our omission.)

Santon Village at Marian Library, University of Dayton
IT TAKES A VILLAGE