

Mosaic answers coronavirus puzzle

UPFRONT



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Patricia Cream, left, and Leah Mitchell admire the mosaic they created with friends and family in the backyard of their Old Town home. The women began the mosaic May 2 to pass the time during the COVID-19 shutdown. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

It got to the point, rather quickly, when they had finished all the puzzles in the house – and then all the puzzles in the neighborhood that they could borrow.

And it was only May.

“If not for COVID-19, we’d also be traveling, visiting our kids, working outside the home,” said Cream, director of The Gallery ABQ, an artist co-op forced to close in March until it partly reopened in June. “We had to cancel a trip to France.”

So, puzzles.

But with their supply gone dry, the women decided to put pieces together in a different, more artful and unique way – by creating a mosaic.

Mitchell, a senior manager and accountant at Sandia National Laboratories, had learned the art of mosaic-making and wanted to put those skills into practice in a big way – as in a nearly 12-foot-by-4-foot big way.

Mitchell also researched designs for large flowers, drawing them on a long swath of butcher paper spread across the couple’s long dining room table and an adjoining card table beginning on May 2.

Plastic wrap was unfurled atop the butcher paper to keep the glued tile pieces from sticking to the paper. Wire mesh was placed on top of that.

And then came the pieces of this floral landscape, the cups and saucers and plates, the pitchers and statues, and anything ceramic or porcelain or pottery that friends and family donated to the cause.

“It became this community project,” Cream said. “Family and neighbors brought us things. Ladies from the gallery brought us a broken cow, a bunny statue, a beautiful blue and white plate.”



The mosaic stretched across a large dining table and adjoining card table in the dining room of Patricia Cream and Leah Mitchell from May to September. (Courtesy of Patricia Cream)

Grandsons, she said, “found” plates that were mysteriously, suddenly broken. And Mitchell and Cream used coffee cups and souvenirs from Alaska to New York.

“We can look at the mosaic and see pieces that bring back memories over the last 17 years,” Cream said.

For the next four months, the women spent each weekend cutting and fitting and gluing each piece, using weld bond glue, starting first with the flowers, then the leaves, the ground, the sky where butterflies and dragonflies flitted.

Cream took a photo of their daily progress, sharing those photos online with family and friends, especially their daughters in Denver and Houston.

“It was like a group watching this project cataloged day by day,” she said. “It’s truly a story of how we kept a sense of togetherness and how we kept our sanity.”

Instead of throwing their usual large party on Labor Day weekend, Mitchell and Cream invited a handful of friends and family to don their masks and help finish the project. They mortared the mosaic to four tile backer boards, attached the boards with french cleats to a cinderblock wall in their backyard, grouted and cleaned the mosaic in place until the beauty of the work shone in the sunlight.

“I got to help wash the grouting off and felt like I got to clean Michelangelo’s brushes,” friend Eleanor Milroy said.



Friends and family grout the mosaic during Labor Day weekend. (Courtesy of Patricia Cream)

It was like that in a way, a beautiful, brightly colored field of flowers painstakingly put together like a community puzzle, each piece a memory or a gift, a way to pass the time under COVID-19 precautions, a way to put back the pieces of a jumbled world.

“It was truly a work of love from our family and friends,” Cream said. “Photos don’t do it justice. You need to see it in person.” Maybe some day when the coronavirus crisis is over, when the world comes together again, those who know and love this family will.