

It's a makers' market

Grant brings artisans, buyers to City Hall for unique gifts

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY

Not everybody stormed the mall Friday.

Some shoppers scrambled up the august marble steps of Waterbury City Hall to fondle hats knitted from the fleece of an alpaca named Darcy, or sample Topsy Peach Jam from OmNomJom Jams and Jellies, or wiggle through a hula hoop fashioned by Bring The Hoopla. All of these products and more were on display at Friday's preview of the Holiday Artisan Market, which continues all day today at City Hall.

"The thing I like about this is as you drive through Waterbury, it's hard to ignore the blighted areas," said Steve Vass of Waterbury. "But something like this is a bright star for Waterbury. I'd like to buy something from everyone here."

The Holiday Artisan Market is a signature element of State of Makers, a statewide showcase of artisans intended to promote innovative handmade goods created by Connecticut designers and artisans.

A partnership of the city of Waterbury and CreateHereNow, the event, which began with Friday night's ticketed preview party, is a chance for buyers to connect with makers and to support individual, handcrafted products, such as jewelry, fine art prints, soaps, fiber arts, pottery, home decor and more.

"I get to meet people here face to face," said Anna Murfin of A. Muse Emporium of Loveliness, a ceramic and fine art producer. "There's no middleman. They get to ask me questions and everything here comes with a story. To me, that's very empowering as an artist. It's the antithesis of consumerism."

The free event is intended as an alternative to mall or online shopping. More than 50 local vendors are showcasing their products, providing visitors with the opportunity to purchase work from the most talented artists in Connecticut.

SHOPPERS HAD A CHANCE to watch artisans like June Bissonnette of Woodbury's Lavender Creek Farm spin alpaca yarn grown by the six alpaca on their farm. Each product offered had a picture and name of the animal from which the yarn was spun. Shoppers were also able to sample food products from vendors.

"I make over 50 flavors and I will do special orders," crowed Melissa Manjoney of OmNomNom Jams and Jellies, explaining that the name of her company stems from the satisfied growl of approval uttered by Sesame Street's Cookie Monster after devouring something yummy. "I will try literally any combination. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work."

The chance to meet creators of local products and to find one-of-a-kind gifts animated many of the hundreds of shoppers who strolled through the recently renovated building Friday.

"It makes it so interesting," said Karen Matthews of Wolcott. "It's more than just going to a store and buying something. "You can talk to the artists about their crafts. It broadens your horizons. It's quality, local, handmade art. It's wonderful to support local artists."

MANY OF THE PRODUCTS on offer had a social element tied into their wares, whether it was "upcycling" used spice containers or inner tubes or helping homeless women acquire a skill and support themselves. Village of Power, for instance, sells shawls, scarves and other products sewn by women struggling with substance abuse, homelessness, mental health issues and/or HIV/AIDS.

Grateful Pawz to Trumbull sells fleece warm-up jackets for dogs and has a mission to adopt pit bulls.

"We wanted to shop local," said Doris Baker. She noticed a sidewalk sign that advertised the marketplace while she was taking a break from jury duty Friday and returned in the evening to shop. "These are local things that are not mainstream," she said. "They're one-of-a-kind, unique and not cookie-cutter."

THE ARTISAN MARKET Stems from a \$500,000 grant Connecticut's Office of the Arts, Department of Economic and Community Development received in May from Artplace, a collaboration of national foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts to accelerate creative placemaking across the U.S. The state used that grant to help 22 municipalities promote their own towns and cities. The event is also funded through a grant from the Connecticut Community Foundation and a grant from the City of Waterbury Arts and Tourism Commission.

"What it means is taking our existing assets and using them as a way that artists can have a place to meet other artists and showcase their art," said Rodgers Frantz, director of CreateHereNow.