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Splendor on ice: MCC student carves up a reputation

By Christine McCluskey , Journal Inquirer

Paul A. Palazzo knew the moment he first tried ice carving a few years ago that he was "hooked for life," he says. Since then, Palazzo, a food service management student at Manchester Community College, has improved his ice-carving skills, and this fall he won third place representing MCC in an American Culinary Federation competition held in Hartford.

Palazzo, an East Granby resident, is a Vietnam veteran and 30-year employee of Pratt & Whitney. He always knew he wanted to study culinary arts but didn't know he'd be so drawn to ice carving until he tried it.

Ice is "an awesome medium of art and it's a lot of fun," Palazzo says.

He starts with a template that's usually drawn on paper.

"I like to use newsprint because it adheres to the ice well," he says.

Then, using an electric chainsaw, he gives the ice a rough shape of what it's going to be.

Palazzo's other tools range from large chisels to other power tools to sandpaper.

All these sharp tools mean safety is always a priority for ice carvers, Palazzo says. Someone who's not paying attention can lose a limb or worse.

The block Palazzo starts with is a standard 10 inches thick by 20 inches wide by 40 inches tall and it's about 300 pounds.

Having a background in carpentry and the arts helps, Palazzo says. He comes from a family of carpenters, but isn't sure where his artistic ability came from, he says.

The piece that won the award this fall is an abstract design that looks like a curved tail standing on end with spheres attached to one side of it and a circular design attached to the other side.

Palazzo carved it by himself but had some assistance from helpers, who handled the ice and tools.

The MCC ice-carving team also participates in community service events such as the town Parks and Recreation Department's holiday carnival for children, Palazzo says.

Last year, Palazzo won first place in the student-only Connecticut Restaurant Show, which meant that for this fall's competition he competed as a professional.

Palazzo hopes to make ice carving a part-time business when he's finished with his studies at MCC, and would also like to teach ice carving at some point if he gets good enough, he says.

MCC Professor Glenn Lemaire of the hospitality management department, who's also coordinator of the college's culinary arts program, teaches the session of the Buffet Catering course that focuses on ice carving. He is the one who gave Palazzo his first crack at ice carving a few years ago.

"He's been good since the very beginning," Lemaire says of his student.

"One of the greatest reasons for Paul's success is he always takes on big, challenging projects," Lemaire adds. "He challenges himself. He doesn't stay on the safe side."

Lemaire says having a knack for ice carving is important, "but more importantly you have to really enjoy it, and Paul does."