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Collector takes small step toward the big time

By ARTIKA RANGAN / The News Journal

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The construction workers had been eyeing Erika Nelson's Ford Econoline for weeks, but their questions weren't answered until they saw her leave the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts and unlock the van's door.

"Lady, what is this?" one asked about the color-splashed van decked with loudspeakers and a pair of animal horns. "Are you selling hot dogs?"

Not quite. For one, the items inside aren't for sale. And the only hot dog she carries is a miniature replica of a Nathan's Coney Island frankfurter.

Nelson's van, which will remain outside the art center until April 30, is more appropriately known as "The World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things Traveling Roadside Attraction and Museum."

It is decorated in yellow and red and filled with plenty to see - mostly tiny replicas of super-sized objects, all crafted by Nelson.

There's the world's largest milk jug, Paul Bunyan, King Kong, Babe the Blue Ox and two of the world's largest balls of twine. There's the world's largest otter (the real one can be found in Fergus Falls, Minn.), the world's largest egg (the original is even farther away, in Winlick, Wash.), and much, much more.

While she's in Delaware as artist in residence at the center, Nelson wants to check out some of the biggest things the country's second smallest state has to offer.

There's the biggest motorized shopping cart at the ShopRite supermarket on Newport Pike, the largest frying pan in Sussex County, and, of course, the world's largest rubber band ball, created by Wilmington resident John Bain.

To duplicate the rubber band ball, which she expects to finish in an afternoon, Nelson plans on using the bands that dentists use for braces. "What's better for small rubber band balls than small rubber bands," she joked.

Nelson, a Lucas, Kansas, resident and former art teacher at the University of Kansas, began making models of off-the-wall attractions in 1999, when she traveled across the country to help community art centers. The more unusual things she saw, the more she realized there weren't enough souvenirs.

So, in true artist style, she created her own.

Her ultimate purpose, she explained, is to promote tourism in small towns. "It's a way to show people what else is out there - not a chain restaurant, not a strip mall, but the parts of America that are unique," she says.

Nelson, 32, invented a rule that allows her to create replicas only after she has seen the actual attraction, and she has found both "great things and great stories."

Sac City, Iowa, residents, for example, created an edible, 2,225-pound popcorn ball in 1995 to recognize the popcorn crop's significance in the county. The attraction drew thousands of people, but nearly two years later, locals had grown tired of showing the ball to tourists.

The town hired a demolition expert to load the popcorn ball with dynamite sticks and blow it up at the county fair, but the caramel at the ball's center had not yet solidified, and the explosion never occurred. Instead, it broke into big pieces. Last year, residents decided to rebuild their signature statue. The new popcorn ball weighs nearly 900 pounds more than the original.

Nelson's van is both roadside attraction and home when she's on the road. A typical day, she admits, is "not very romantic" and consists of driving to locations she knows of or attractions she has heard about. On the top of her van, a large map of America depicts various points: Some have black dots (the attractions she has seen); some have yellow dots (the ones she has replicated); and some are hollow because they are the places she has yet to visit.

Nelson compares finding roadside attractions to a treasure hunt - sometimes she knows where they exist, sometimes she drives around.

When she recently drove through Ohio, she remembered hearing about the world's largest loaf of bread. When she asked many of the locals, they told her no such thing existed. Finally, a convenience-store owner said, "That man over there works at a factory with a large loaf of bread out front. You think that could be it?" Turned out, it was.



Karl Schlatter

Artist Erika Nelson creates, collects and exhibits very small replicas of very large things.

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IF YOU GO

WHAT: The World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things Traveling Roadside Attraction and Museum

WHERE: Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, 200 S. Madison St., Wilmington. 656-6466

WHEN: Through April 30

TICKETS: Visits are free, but hours are unpredictable. Call the center for information.

On the Web

Erika Nelson's site: www.worldslargestthings.com

Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts: www.thedcca.org

In addition to replicating the First State's biggest things, Nelson has also spent time working with members of the Wilmington Senior Center and students from the Kuumba Academy in Wilmington. She created a project in which elementary students and senior citizens will exchange experiences and make a team storytelling quilt. After working at countless art centers nationwide and viewing idiosyncratic attractions most may never see, Nelson has reached the conclusion that people are the same everywhere. "It doesn't matter what race you are, how much you make, what accent you have or where you're from," she explained. "People are people. Everyone's got a story."

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