

And around we go! Kingsport Cuts Ribbon on 'Glorious' Carousel

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KINGSPORT — One man's dream of bringing a traditional carousel to Kingsport has come true.

"It's been a marvelous ride all the way," former Alderwoman Valerie Joh said on Monday. "It's not only a carousel. It's a glorious carousel."

The Kingsport Office of Cultural Arts and Engage Kingsport held a ribbon-cutting and dedication ceremony Monday afternoon for the city's new carousel, located next to the Kingsport Farmers Market.

Several hundred people packed the market on Monday to hear remarks from the volunteers overseeing the project, to visit the new gift shop and to witness the unveiling of the carousel.



And of course, to be some of the first people to take a ride on the merry-go-round.

The carousel project began more than six years ago as a dream of Valerie's late husband Gale, who grew up in Binghamton, N.Y. — the "Carousel Capital of the World." After Gale died in 2010, Valerie and Kingsport resident Reggie Martin pushed the project forward, working to bring on volunteers and gain community support.

"We owe it all to Gale who had the spark, the idea of bringing a carousel to Kingsport," Martin said. "I think somehow (Gale) knew he wouldn't be around to see it to fruition, but he inspired me to do it and it's been a great project."

Volunteers and carvers formed a nonprofit organization called Engage Kingsport to spearhead the project, leading the carving effort, refurbishing the frame and raising the money to fund the endeavor. The project got a major boost in early 2011 from the Beardsley Zoo of Bridgeport, Conn., with the donation of a vintage 1956 Herschel carousel frame.

Work progressed at a steady pace with the volunteers working essentially a full-time job carving, painting and restoring the carousel frame.



"All of this could not have happened without the 300 volunteers, who worked more than 15,000 hours," Martin said. "Some days at the studio I had to ask them to leave. Their dedication, persistence and love of what they were doing made this project possible."

The carousel includes 32 wooden riding animals and two chariots, 24 rounding boards depicting notable sites within the city and 24 hand-carved “sweep” animals around the top. Each animal took 800 to 1,000 hours to carve and paint.

Housed in a 70-foot octagonal “roundhouse” with a small gift shop, the carousel will be open year-round, six days a week. One dollar will get you a ride.

Valerie has told the story of how, when her late husband brought up the carousel idea, she remarked “when pigs fly.”

Today, a hand-carved winged wooden pig tops the control booth for the carousel and the Flying Pig Gallery & Studio has been established in downtown, through a partnership of Engage Kingsport and the city.

“I’m proud to be part of it. It’s something that will be remembered not only by us but by generations to come,” Valerie said. “Gale would be the happiest man on earth if he were here today.”

City Manager Jeff Fleming provided details about a proposed park to go beside the carousel, an agreement made by the city several years ago when a location for the carousel was being decided.

Keep America Beautiful and Lowe’s have agreed to a \$20,000 grant to help build the park later this fall, and Fleming said the greenspace would also be a free Wi-Fi hotspot.

“The carousel is an example of all that is good about Kingsport,” Fleming said. “It’s so much more than bricks, mortar, wood and steel. It’s a work of art, a testament to friendship, commitment and community.”