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WKU basketry conference, exhibition weaves traditions together

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Jul 20, 2019



Mary Thompson, of Cherokee, N.C., poses with a finished traditional river cane in the double weave style.

AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com

Working with bandaged fingers, Jane Sloop spread river cane stalks across a table at Western Kentucky University on Thursday, enduring a few cuts in hopes of learning about the most traditional form of Cherokee basket making.

“It’s more challenging just by the nature of it,” said Mary Thompson, a Cherokee basket weaver and instructor from North Carolina. “The edges of the splint can cut you, can scrape you.”

Basket weaving has always been in Thompson’s family, but she didn’t discover river cane until about 15 or 17 years ago as part of her tribe’s cultural preservation efforts.

The material demands toughness and patience from its handler, and these days it’s increasingly scarce due to loss of habitat.

“River cane likes waterfront property,” Thompson said. “And so does everyone else.”

The tradition was just one of several featured in workshops at the National Basketry Organization’s 2019 Conference hosted at Western Kentucky University’s Kentucky Museum last week.



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For Kimberley Harding of Arlington, Mass., learning from Thompson is not an experience she could have done back home. She picked up basket weaving four years ago, and it was her first year attending the conference.

“There’s little subtleties in working this material,” Harding said. “When you see these baskets, you appreciate how much work goes into it.”

The conference also marked the opening of a new exhibition at the Kentucky Museum. Through Basketry Now, the National Basketry Organization has assembled contemporary and traditional basketry pieces crafted with unexpected materials. Pieces are made from zip ties and shredded dollar bills and many take the form of abstract sculptures, stretching the expectations of a conventional basket.

A woman in a red shirt is working at a table in a workshop, surrounded by various items. The image has a blue overlay with the text "INCREASE your sales." and "Let's Grow | P". A small play button icon is in the top right corner. At the bottom left, it says "Market Force Information, US Survey, 2017." data-bbox="195 370 795 619"/>

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Subverting expectations and catching the eye is the idea, according to National Basketry Organization executive director Pam Morton.

“We want to keep the art of basketry alive, and we want to celebrate its past, present and future,” she said.

Brent Bjorkman, director of the Kentucky Museum, shared that view.



“You might come here and think ‘baskets?’ You’re thinking you’re going to see these vessels, right? But you’re going to walk around here and you’re like ‘Wow, what are these things? What are they made out of?’ ” he said.

For Morton, the art form is as varied as the people and cultures behind them. Humans have been making baskets for thousands of years, “and they actually last much longer than we do,” she said.



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“When you get to native makers, it is their heritage,” Morton said.

That's the case for Thompson.

“I have learned more about my history and my culture. I think that knowledge is something that I probably wouldn't have been interested in but that I appreciate now,” she said.

She's hoping to pass on the Cherokee tradition to her grandson, David, or De Wi as he's called in Cherokee. At 11 years old, he accompanied his grandmother to the conference, assisting as her “apprentice in training.”

“My mom, myself, my sister, my daughter, we're all weavers and basket makers,” Mary Thompson said. “Now he's getting started and maybe the tradition will live on.”

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Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.

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