

THIS COAT IS 'LIKE A BOOK'

A visible joining of cultures

From around the world to around LI, seniors create art

BY RHODA AMON
STAFF WRITER

Madona Cole-Lacy is taking her "Coat of Many Cultures" — and its message — on the road.

More than a fabric design, it's a celebration of cultural diversity, she says of the oversized, 76-inch-tall garment, which is displayed in the Glen Cove Public Library. Next month it moves to the North Bellmore library, and in February to the East Meadow library.

Cole-Lacy, a Wantagh-based textile artist and fashion designer, got help with her "coat" from members of the Salvation Army Freeport Senior Center, who contributed a panel each depicting his or her cultural heritage.

Although the title suggests the biblical Joseph's Coat of Many Colors, Cole-Lacy's idea was to weave together "the richness of many different traditions and customs so you could read the coat like a book," she said. The coat consists of 16 different panels.

Memories, memories

The seniors were encouraged to let their imaginations roam free and to express their memories, often with nontraditional material.

Lovetta Edwards, 81, who grew up on a peanut farm in South Carolina, festooned her panel with peanuts. Jamaican-born Zelline Lowe, 72, created a colorful collage of the greens, blues and gold of the native fruit, limbo dancers, a Jamaican flag, sugar cane and a coconut tree. Add more Jamaican and religious symbols by Francina Hundley, 68, an Italian scene by Ann Hetzel, 80, King Tut and other Egyptian images by Mary Yacoub, 81, and an African-West Indian jungle fantasy by Juanita Dash Kaimakides, 83, whose father was West Indian-Portuguese and her mother, African-American-Native American.

Many of the seniors didn't know they could draw, much less paint, on textiles, said Cole-Lacy, who taught five art workshops at the senior center, operated in cooperation with the Nassau County Department of Senior Citizen Affairs. Fabrics and materials were provided by Cole-Lacy with a \$2,500 grant from a JPMorgan Chase program administered by the Huntington Arts Council.

"Most didn't know they



NEWSDAY PHOTO / THOMAS A. FERRARA

Madona Cole-Lacy with the "Coat of Many Cultures" she created, along with seniors in Freeport

were artistic," Cole-Lacy said. The work, she said, raised the seniors' self esteem as well as awakening pride in their heritage. After completing a panel, one woman told her, "Now I feel like an artist."

Everyone seemed to feel like an artist at a reception for 150 seniors at the Freeport Recreation Center this fall, where the Coat of Many Cultures was unveiled. "Madona energized them," said Fran Petrone, the senior program director. "People started talking about their ethnic backgrounds and we saw what a very diverse community we are."

"Many of us never have the opportunity to talk about our backgrounds," said Capt. Amanda Lumbila, corps officer with her husband, Capt. Campbell Lumbila, of the Salvation Army Community Center in Freeport. Inspired by the project, she said, the seniors "talked about how their grandparents came to the United States and what life was like for them."

For Cole-Lacy, perhaps the most poignant contributors were her parents, Christian and Evelyn Cole, who came from Sierra Leone in West Africa. Evelyn Cole, 83, who founded a pre-primary school in her native village of Water-

loo, incorporated a photo of her students in uniform that her daughter scanned onto fabric.

Christian Cole, 86, is a retired director of extramural studies at the University of Sierra Leone.

Cole-Lacy came to the United States in 1979, after completing high school in Sierra Leone. She got her master's in art education from Brooklyn College and quickly found her niche as a designer of Madona Cole Originals, one-of-a-kind wearable art, hand-painted, dyed or silk-screened scarfs, dresses, skirts, coats, headpieces, neckties, pillows and wall art.

The Wantagh artist, who reared her children, Samuel, 14, and Madona, 12, as a single mother, was married in 2004 to singer-guitarist James Lacy, who works with her on educational programs.

A passion for education

Her passion, she said, has always been educating through art and motivating others to be creative. Her Web site, mytimehascome.org, promotes "tolerance to racial, ethnic and generational differences."

"Art breaks down barriers," she said.

So does food. The reception at the Freeport Recreation Center ended with food of

many cultures. Although she didn't create an art panel, Izetta Gayle, 58, of Freeport was one of the biggest contributors to the reception feast, providing dishes such as jerk chicken and saltfish and ackee, a fruit from her native Jamaica. Local restaurants also contributed their ethnic specialties.

Cole-Lacy is now seeking other grants and other community groups interested in creating Coats of Many Cultures. The art project is also an effective tool for teaching children an appreciation of diversity, she says.

"It fosters a sense of belonging and accomplishment. They love it," says Cole-Lacy, who will teach "Creating Art With African Textiles" in a children's program celebrating Black History Month in February at the Glen Cove Library.

A busy month, which also includes an art exhibit in the Freeport Recreation Center, climaxes with "A Gala Celebration of the Creative Spirit" on Feb. 7 at the Swan Club in Roslyn Harbor.

Cole-Lacy also will appear with her Coat of Many Cultures at a "Meet the Artist" reception at 3 p.m. Dec. 17 at the Glen Cove Library. For more information, contact Cole-Lacy at 516-783-9178 or e-mail her at madona@mytimehascome.org.

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