

Their artistry will light the way

IF YOU GO

What: Gala celebration and silent auction of original lanterns made by local artists.
Where: Essex Art Center, 56 Island St., Lawrence
When: Celebration and auction is Dec. 15 at 6:30 p.m. Lanterns will be on display Dec. 6 to 15.
Cost: \$20 in advance; \$25 at the door.

BY YADIRA BETANCES
STAFF WRITER

LAWRENCE — When Joseph Unni found old floorboards at the abandoned Lincoln Foods building, it was like discovering gold.

Unni, 41, loved the rustic look of the birch, the cracks on the wood and the tight rings showing its age.

Days after getting the wood during a salvage job, he received a letter from Ground-

work Lawrence inviting him to participate in a project to make a lantern. When he began thinking about his design, Unni, who is both a woodworker and artist, knew exactly what he would be using — the old lumber from Lincoln Foods.

Unni is one 15 local artists from Methuen, Haverhill and Lawrence, who will have their lanterns on display Dec. 6 to 15 at Essex Art Center, 56 Island St. The lanterns will be auctioned Dec. 15, with proceeds

to benefit Groundwork Lawrence.

With this Friday's deadline approaching, Unni has been sanding, cutting the wood into curved pieces and making mortises and tenons that fit like pieces of a puzzle. The final result will be a square hurricane-type lantern.

"I want to keep the nail holes ... and cracks because it adds character to the piece," Unni

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Joseph Unni, 41, of Unni Woodworks, works on a lantern he is building of wood from the old Lincoln Foods building in Lawrence. His lantern will be displayed at the Essex Art Center from Dec. 6 to 15, along with lanterns made by other local artists. The lanterns will be auctioned Dec. 15.

ANGIE BEAULIEU/Staff photo

LANTERNS: Artists' work will light the way

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said as he worked at his shop, Unni Woodworks at 300 Union St.

Groundwork Lawrence has been sponsoring the annual lantern project since 2001, said Maggie Super Church, director of Groundwork Lawrence.

"Lanterns cut across cultures and artists reflect that in their own way," she said. "I feel lanterns represent hope and renewal, and we want to create light and hope in the city."

The only rules are that artists use recyclable material and the lanterns are lit from the inside with a candle or light bulb. Super Church said using recycled products is consistent with Groundwork Lawrence's mission. The nonprofit organization works outdoors with youngsters, teaching them about the environment.

Scrap metal, wood, glass and paper are used to make works of art, she said. In past years, artwork has included a standing

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**Maggie Super Church,
director of Groundwork Lawrence.**

lamp with a copper flower holding a light and a teapot made of wire and papier-mache.

Super Church said the lantern project is something artists and residents look forward to. She said about two-thirds of the artists return to the event each year, and residents have an opportunity to buy an original piece of work by a local artist.

At the silent auction, lanterns sell for \$50 to \$700, with Groundwork Lawrence splitting the profit with the artists. The nonprofit organization uses the money to help pay for its programs.

Artists are given freedom to come up with

their own design.

"We never know what we're going to get," Super Church said. "The artist's imagination is the only driver."

Unni said he wanted to participate in the lantern project to use wood in a creative and fun way.

He worked out of his basement before moving to the Lawrence mill six months ago. There, he makes one of a kind furniture and cabinets. It's a far cry from his previous job as a network engineer manager at the Boston Stock Exchange. He established Unni Woodworks after being laid off from his former job.

Unni did not get any professional training, but has been working with wood for many years. He even made a cradle out of redwood for his daughter Hannah.

"It was a labor of love to see her in it," he said.

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ANGIE BEAULIEU/Staff photo

Joe Unni, 41, of Unni Woodworks builds a lantern from wood salvaged from the old Lincoln Foods building in Lawrence. His lantern will be on display from Dec. 6 to 15 at the Essex Art Center. Other lanterns made by local artists will be on view and will be auctioned on Dec. 15.

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