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## Artistic visions displayed

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You never know what you'll find at an art show, and the Illiana Artists exhibition at the Indiana Welcome Center in Hammond proves that point.

In addition to paintings, sculptures and other common media, the exhibition includes a chair-decorating contest.

"We always make these art shows family time," Frances Crisman of Merrillville said as she admired a wall hanging. "My husband and I like to paint, my daughter is taking an interest in the art world, so we all get some great ideas."

In conjunction with the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority, the Illiana Artists group hosted a recent open house for the exhibit.

Hundreds of people browsed, talked, and became educated about various art forms.

Jim and Nancy Smallman of Munster visited to collect art for their home and to support Nancy's longtime friend Ann Noldin, who entered pieces in the exhibit.

"We've known each other since high school, and Jim and I love to travel to see her artwork," Nancy said. "Ann is very talented, as are all the members of this art group."

Cathy Sutkowski of Schererville takes art seriously as a vocation and hobby. She teaches art classes to elementary school students and in her free time paints water color and acrylic abstracts.

"It's beyond a hobby," she said with a laugh as she gazed at wall hangings and photos displayed in the exhibit hall. "It's a passion for me — a fun, creative experience that keeps me balanced."

Mary Kuric of Highland is a founding member of Illiana Artists, which was founded in 1980. Membership has proven to be a constant, positive experience, she said.

Current president Maria Braun-Perez agrees.

“We are approximately 70 members strong. Our meetings offer a venue for growth of creative expression, sharing of ideas and opportunities to be involved as an active member of the art community,” she said. “And our group is expanding on its mission of ‘artists helping artists’ by contributing yearly to youth-oriented exhibits.”

The chair-decorating contest is part of that mission. The display of 25 small chairs can be found at the exhibit entrance.

The CHAIRish the Child contest, sponsored by the Prevent Child Abuse Lake County organization, arranged the child-size seats in a circle.

Decorated by area middle school and high school students, they included some unusual art.

“I like the Dr. Seuss one, but the Disney mouse one is good too,” said 9-year-old James Evanhoff of Hammond. “The one that has the game pieces, like the checkers, is fun too.”

The latter was the brainchild of students at Hammond’s Morton High School.

James’ mother, Carla Evanhoff, commented on the chair artists’ creativity.

“I heard that the kids entering the chairs were briefed on the Prevent Child Abuse mission,” she said, “so this contest is a good thing in many ways.”