

# BACKYARD SB

## 1st Thursday events dig in deep

**W**HY WOULD a 110-pound woman shovel sand onto State Street in the dark? It may sound like a weird initiation prank, but Michelle Jellen was in the employ of the Downtown Organization. Jellen, a lightweight yet heavyweight staffer for the DO, was setting up a Sandcastle Festival promotion for September's First Thursday with her manager Jennifer Rose. "We trucked in a couple of tons of sand. We just thought how great it would be, but we didn't realize we'd be shoveling into the night," laughs Rose.



**KAREN TELLEEN-LAWTON**

ers read poems composed after observing the show's iron crosses which were popular atop houses in 20th century Chiapas, Mexico. The rich history of the Chiapas crosses, at least one of which later graced the Santa Cruz Island home of the Stantons, made a spectacular backdrop for the readings.

These two evenings were memorable, but it was the sandcastle "performance art" that hooked me. Walking by in street clothes instead of bathing ones, onlookers found the sand sculpture bizarrely out of place. But Santa Barbara's downtown and beachfront are so close: why shouldn't the beach occasionally come downtown? I started wondering who was behind this clever feat, and found the story behind the story at the Downtown Organization.

The DO, supported by grant money and a portion of business license receipts, began kicking around the 1st Thursday idea almost two years ago. After some general discussions, a 1st Thursday group formed. "Each one on the subcommittee took a city that had an Artwalk or a First or Second Saturday, a

First Friday, or whatever," said Rose. "We looked at ones that survived and ones that failed."

San Jose's successful venue is an eclectic mix of quilt museum, contemporary art spaces, and classic galleries which clicked by encouraging them to work together on a general theme. Other combinations that thrived integrated restaurants and retail, strong museums, or a historical site. Palm Springs attributed their success to providing transportation among venues. Programs that didn't last tended to eschew locals for tourists, or favor crafts at the expense of the fine arts.

"We felt it was important to integrate public performance, not just inside space like galleries and museums," Rose told me. "Because we have a long linear downtown, we need public performances to keep the action going between spots."

That's where the sand came in. The DO knew the Sandcastle Festival, presented by the Citizens Planning Association and Foundation, wasn't getting enough publicity. On a lark, they asked them to come and build a sandcastle on State Street. It was one of the most popular public events so far.

The public performance insight has helped 1st Thursday sustain and grow,

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as visitors and locals see the action and seek out additional venues. The community is getting involved, designing promos for their fundraisers and dovetailing their activities with 1st Thursday themes.

This month, four galleries including Frameworks and Edward Cella will show special previews of The Girlfriends Project - Celebrating Doll Artistry, benefiting Girls Inc. Channing Peake Gallery's Tradition and Transition exhibit on the California Missions will include a 7:00 performance of California songs from that period. Samy's Camera will couple a photo journey to Boston with wine tasting from Epiphany Winery.

Tomorrow's outdoor performances will include street comedians from Los Angeles as well as the five top scorers in the Independent's "Best of Santa Barbara Bands." Can it get any better than this?

If the DO has its way, it will continue to get better. At the moment they're working on a "Kids' 1st Thursday" and toying with interactive art. They're also planning an ice sculpture for December. Michelle, get out your pick axe!

*Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of people, nature, events, and observations transporting the reader around the world and back to Santa Barbara. Her writing can be found at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com), including excerpts from her book, Canyon Voices - the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon.*

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