



Love, family and eggs

The documentary *Eggshelland* takes a look at a long-standing Easter tradition — and the family behind it

By ANN FAZZINI

Every January, after the holiday presents have been opened and the Christmas tree's been taken down, Ron and Betty Manolio start thinking about eggs. Lots of eggs — thousands of them.

Eggs are the stars of the show in the Lyndhurst couple's annual Easter display. Hand-painted in bright rainbow hues, more than 40,000 eggs are arranged on the Manolios' front lawn to form pictures — cartoon characters, an Easter bunny, a cross, a Cleveland Browns logo. They call it Eggshelland. And they've been doing it for 52 years.

Tens of thousands of curious visitors from all over the country come to see the display every year, lining the Manolios' street with cars and marveling over the intricate artwork. The pilgrimage to Eggshelland has become a yearly tradition for many, one that's spanned generations.

Video producer Christopher Noice, originally from Lancaster, was just one of the visitors who kept coming back to Eggshelland. The first time he saw the unique display, he thought it would be a great, quirky subject for a documentary film.

"Your mind spins," he said. "The eggs are so perfect and it's visually stunning."

A few years later, Cleveland producer Julie Matthews helped him get the project off the ground. They met with Ron and Betty and arranged to follow them for a full year to document the process of creating Eggshelland.

It all starts in January, when the Manolios choose the display's theme for the year. They often incorporate whatever movie and cartoon characters are popular at the time. Past themes have included *Star Wars*, *The Wizard of Oz* and "Land, Sea and Air," featuring *The Lord of the Rings*, *Finding Nemo* and *Peter Pan*.

Using colored pencils, Betty creates the design and transfers it to grid paper. Then, Ron painstakingly works out how many eggs will be needed, how many of each color. He also adds in extras in case of breakage.

For the next several weeks, the Manolios collect eggs. The pair regularly visits the Sidewalk Cafe, a local 24-hour diner, to "crack" eggs, being careful to leave the shell mostly intact, and empty the contents into a pail. Kitchen workers then refrigerate the contents to use in omelettes and other egg dishes.

Next, Ron cleans the shells in a

soap and water mixture and spends hours in his basement workshop painting them in bright hues. He sets them out on specially made racks to dry and then stores them in boxes by color. When the display comes down, the eggs are stored for use next year.

As Easter approaches, the Manolios' children and grandchildren gather to set up Eggshelland. Rows of pegs are measured across the lawn and pounded into the ground at a uniform height. Neighbors and volunteers help place eggs on the pegs according to Ron's grid plan.

The process is detailed, and the family always faces challenges, often related to the unpredictable north-eastern Ohio weather.

"You can't beat Mother Nature," laughs Ron, who sometimes even shovels snow off his lawn. Over the years, Eggshelland has weathered snow, rain, hail and one unsolved case of vandalism (several years ago, an unknown perpetrator walked across an egg portrait of Barney the Purple Dinosaur).

Despite the setbacks, the Manolios' hard work pays off year after year. "When I see the faces on the little kids, it makes me proud to think I did something great," says Ron.

Just as Noice was set to wrap up filming, Ron gave him a stack of home movies to incorporate into the final cut. The footage showed Eggshelland through the years, but also included scenes from Ron and Betty's honeymoon, family vacations and other happy events spanning

See Eggshelland (the display and the movie)

Eggshelland 2010 will be on display from March 28 (Palm Sunday) to April 4 (Easter) at 1031 Linden Lane, Lyndhurst 44124.

Eggshelland DVDs will be available for purchase at the display and at www.eggshellandmovie.com. Check the site often for details, as well as information on a possible DVD premiere at the Cedar Lee Theater in Cleveland Heights.

several decades. "It was just gorgeous footage of a wonderful life," Noice says.

The footage added a whole new element to the movie — the story of Ron and Betty's marriage. Noice wound up including more from the Manolios' lives outside of Eggshelland, including their love of collecting classic cars and attending car shows.

"It's a tribute to a quirky tradition, but also to a life well lived," says Noice.

When Matthews brought a rough cut of the movie to show the Manolios for the first time, the family gathered to watch. The film sparked laughter and tears from everyone in the room. "This is my life," Ron said as the movie concluded. "I just watched my life on TV."

Noice and Matthews premiered the documentary at the historic Cedar Lee Theater in Cleveland Heights over two nights. Every seat was filled for both showings, and the Manolios were treated like celebrities. "People said they loved it," Betty says. "Many people said they didn't know how much work we put into the display."

"We really do it every year for the grandkids," Ron adds. "I'm sure they were very proud of the movie, too."

At press time, *Eggshelland* has been shown at five film festivals and won two awards, including one for best low-budget feature. The *Eggshelland* DVD will be released on Palm Sunday and will be available to buy at www.eggshellandmovie.com. DVDs will also be available for purchase at the Eggshelland display.

Noice believes the appeal of the movie lies in the characters and the community it depicts. "Everybody saw something or someone they could relate to," he says.

For 52 years, Ron and Betty Manolio have decorated their front lawn in Lyndhurst with tens of thousands of brightly colored Easter eggs in elaborately designed displays. A new documentary telling their story over the decades has just been released.

"You may not know Ron, but you know someone like Ron," Matthews adds.

For Noice, the experience was especially meaningful. "It was humbling and inspiring," he says. "In a world that can be so negative, a place like Eggshelland continues to prove that if you put goodness out there, people will respond to it in a deeply emotional and important way." □

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