Gothenburg woman sculpts creatures and critters from balloons

Pull it.

Pump it full.

Tie it.

Twist it.

Wrap it.

Turn it.

Twist it again, this time overlapping it.

Shelly Henninger makes it sound easy to turn a long piece of squeaky rubber into an amazing work of balloon art.

“I make all kinds of things,” she said.

And although she knows how to make the typical balloon poodles and birds, Henninger's favorites are complete balloon sculptures.

"I made a 6-foot balloon princess for my granddaughter," she said. "The skirt flaired out so big she could play inside it."

This isn't a talent the Gothenburg native has had all her life. In fact, she taught herself how to make balloon creatures about four years ago after seeing it done at the Nebraska State Fair in Lincoln with her granddaughter Abree.

"We stood there and watched a lady doing it forever," Henninger said. "When I got home, I got on the Internet and started learning how to do it."

Hundreds of broken balloons later, Henninger now has the balloon sculptures down to an art.

"I've made quite a few for the teachers and the classrooms," she said of her work place.

Henninger has worked as a custodian at Dudley Elementary for 27 years. Her husband, Keith, works there also.

Earlier this month Henninger made balloon creatures for each of the kindergarten classrooms as prizes for their "floor war."

It started in Molly Koehn's room.

"I noticed there was nothing on the floor all week," Henninger said. "No paper or anything."

So she left a nice note for the class on the board.

When fellow kindergarten teacher Janet Evans saw the note, she turned it into a contest.

Jan Blecha even tried to bribe Henninger with an apple pie and April Graham joined in when the teachers secretly began tossing paper on the floor in each other's rooms.

In the end, Henninger made a balloon sculpture for each room: a fish, an elephant, a seal and a gorilla.

"It's something fun for the kids," she said.

Administrators have asked Henninger if she would consider showing off her talents as part of an assembly for students.

Others have approached her to make balloon art for parties and gatherings.

A little shy, Henninger said she doesn't want to be the center of attention. She makes the balloon sculptures simply for her own enjoyment and to make others smile.

Actually, Henninger has another giant sculpture planned. She's making a huge Superman for 2-year-old grandson Brody for Christmas.

"I started getting into magic once," she said. "Kids used to always ask me, 'Can you pull something out of my ear?'"

The balloons, though, are more fun, she said.

Every twist brings something new.