

'Bead Three' sculpture catches throws, Carnival spirit

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The first sculpture of “Bead Three” was installed and dedicated on Tuesday in the Gibson Quad. The new interactive piece replaces the old beloved bead tree, which was taken down last year after it experienced extensive termite damage. (Photo by Sally Asher)

All Tulanians knew the Bead Tree well: The tradition of throwing Carnival beads into the branches each year created a living sculpture that brought cheer to all who looked upon it. Sadly, the beloved Bead Tree was removed from Tulane’s uptown campus in May 2019 due to extensive termite and lightning damage that left it vulnerable to falling. Since that time, plans have been in the works to honor the tradition of the Bead Tree.

Just in time for Mardi Gras, the tradition has been renewed with the “planting” of the Bead Tree. The first of three 21-foot-tall steel and acrylic “trees” was installed near the spot where the Bead Tree once stood. The Bead Tree was designed by Tulane School of Architecture professor Irene Keil and her husband, local artist David Gregor, as a way to memorialize the Bead Tree.

“This is an alternative. It doesn’t look like an actual tree, but it’s a symbol that functions to catch beads and doesn’t cause any damage. It will be a new tradition,” said Keil.

On Tuesday, Feb. 18, President Mike Fitts initiated that new tradition when he joined student leaders and staff for a ceremonial first beading.

“This is an incredible symbol for the university, symbolizing the joy of New Orleans and the joy of Tulane,” said President Fitts.

The trees are fabricated from 6-inch-diameter weathered black iron pipe, with steel branches attached to the trunks, which will allow for the catchment of beads. A series of clear plexiglass rods runs through the pipe trunk and emanates light in the evening hours. Keil and Gregor were assisted in the construction by Tulane's Facilities Services and are particularly grateful to Demian Weidenhaft for welding the structure.

Two more trees will be installed in the coming weeks to complete the tree sculpture. The Bead Tree will form a shape that mimics the outline of the original Bead Tree canopy. As visitors and the Tulane community add their contributions, Bead Tree will be dynamic and ever changing, truly capturing the spirit of Tulane.