



The Guardians by Gustavo Vejarano is the first installation commissioned by a private developer through Coral Springs' public art program.

NORTHWEST PASSAGES

Coral Springs Museum of Art
Marks 10th Year as the City's Cultural
Scene Continues to Blossom

BY LEON M. RUBIN

Maybe it's something in the air. Or in the water – this is Coral Springs, after all. But whatever its source might be, there is an undeniable energy surrounding the arts and cultural community in this thriving northwest Broward County city.



Just 43 years old, the community already has a rich tradition of encouraging, supporting and participating in the arts. Its first structure – a covered bridge built in 1964 – was intended by the town's original developer, Coral Ridge Properties, to make an architectural statement. According to the City of Coral Springs' website, the company's president, James S. Hunt, "wanted to convey a sense of the Old South on the otherwise barren landscape."

The bridge is now a Florida Heritage Site. So, too, is the city's first building, the original Coral Ridge Properties sales office, which after several moves and indignities (including use for smoke rescue drills), now stands in Mullins Park and houses a museum of Coral Springs history.

But it is in the last dozen years or so that the arts have truly gained critical mass. The groundwork was laid in 1990 with the construction of the Coral Springs City Center – a multipurpose facility that combined a municipal auditorium and a gymnasium. It didn't take many years for

city leaders to realize that such a combination was not ideal and, in 1996, construction began on a \$4-million renovation project that would transform the facility into today's Coral Springs Center for the Arts. A vital component of

welcomed more than 135,000 visitors and students, exhibited the works of almost 200 artists in its galleries and works by approximately 4,800 artists in its lobby area, which regularly features shows by local artists and students. "We have had

"And it is going all the time!" O'Keefe reports excitedly.

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

The museum also has experienced great success in engaging people through its annual Artist-in-Resi-



the project was to be the creation of an art museum.

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

Enter Barbara O'Keefe. An experienced arts administrator and management consultant who played a key role in the evolution of the Fort Lauderdale Discovery Center into the Museum of Discovery and Science, O'Keefe was approached by the City of Coral Springs in 1996. "I was asked to look at taking it on," she remembers. "I thought I'd be here for six months – and here I am." She ultimately joined the museum as its founding director and is ecstatic about the fact that it is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

When she first came on board, "There was a big open space and an architectural plan. The city said 'finish this;' put furniture and art exhibitions into place," she says. "I don't think they realized the potential for this museum. It has become one of the real diamonds in this community."

The museum opened officially in early 1997. Since that time, it has

international and national artists," O'Keefe explains, including "blockbuster" exhibitions featuring the likes of Alexandra Nichita, Wolf Kahn, Duane Hansen, Jose Bedia and Dale Chihuly. "But we focus primarily on the really top-notch artists in Florida who have a large body of work but never had the chance to show so much of it at one time or to present a retrospective exhibition."

All of this is presented in a space that O'Keefe loves. "When you walk into this museum, it embraces you," she says.

It also embraces the community. The popular, year-round "Art Classes in an Art Museum" program offers instruction in a wide range of visual arts disciplines for children, teens and adults. Students come primarily from Coral Springs, but also from as far away as Pembroke Pines, Weston, Deerfield Beach and Boca Raton. The educational program got a big boost last year when the previously vacant second floor of the museum was built out by the city, adding more space for classes and a dedicated clay room with 10 wheels and two kilns.

dence program, which began in 2001. Its goal is to create opportunities "for people to watch the creative process in progress and meet artists doing their job," O'Keefe says. "It has worked really well for us. We have had stone sculptors, ceramists, mosaic artists and even an artist working in textiles.

The first piece, *Striding*, was created by Lothar Nickel from a 2,500-pound block of Italian marble. "People loved it. They watched the whole process, from the rough block to the finished sculpture. They picked up chips of marble and took them home," O'Keefe recalls.

The newest work, *Mindscape*, which was just installed, is on a much bigger scale. "It began with 25,000 pounds of red Persian travertine," she says. "It had to be turned with a crane." From this mass of marble, artist Yoshin Ogata created two mirror images that are "very Zenlike – all about water and consciousness. It's just stunning," O'Keefe notes, adding that the finished work weighs "only" 17,000 pounds.



The stunning interior of the Coral Springs Center for the Performing Arts' theater, which seats 1,471.

Currently, in collaboration with the Coral Springs Multicultural Committee, five artists are participating in the residency program in order to create an International Peace Garden on the museum grounds. The artists hail from five different continents, and each is working with stone from the same part of the world: Armen Agop (Egypt), black granite from Zimbabwe; Lothar Nickel (Germany), pink marble from Portugal; Roy Patterson (Maine), granite from New England; Perez Celis (Argentina), stone from Brazil; and the aforementioned Yoshin Ogata (Japan), the travertine marble from Iran. Their very large stone sculptures provide a backdrop for monthly programs hosted by the Multicultural Committee as well as the museum's ongoing educational activities.

O'Keefe says her organization also interacts with the community by providing exhibit space for the Coral Springs Artist Guild and assisting an active Friends of the Museum group in its fundraising efforts. And she is extremely grateful for the continuing investment by the city, which provides computers and IT support, free rent and an annual cash stipend of \$63,000, plus her salary. She has demonstrated her appreciation, among other ways, by "keeping the museum in the black in the 10 years it has been open."

In this 10th anniversary year, the museum's focus is deservedly on the past, but also on the future. Efforts have begun to build an endowment fund. The goal is to raise \$360,000, which would qualify it for \$240,000 in matching funds from the state. "After 10 years, the museum needs this extra revenue stream and the credibility it adds," O'Keefe observes. "It shows that people believe in it."

As does she. "Life is good, and I'm very grateful that I have something creative to do," she says. "Because we're small, I get to do everything. The staff is really great, the board is great; we cross-pollinate and are very happy – and the city is outstanding to really promote the growth of this museum."

GOTTA SING! GOTTA DANCE!

At the same time that the visual arts gained a beautiful new home in Coral Springs, so did the performing arts. Thanks to the city's vision and the creativity of the architectural firms Singer Architects (designers of the Boca Raton Museum of Art) and, later, Zeidler Roberts Partnership (known for its design of the Raymond F Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach) the auditorium/gymnasium was replaced by an intimate 1,471-seat theater with a fully enclosed balcony.

According to General Manager Kevin Barrett, the Center for the Arts recorded 224 event days in 2006, with a total attendance of 178,000 people. Its stage plays host to two types of events, he explains – Broadway touring productions and big-name entertainers presented by the center itself, and a wide array of locally produced concerts, operas, dance recitals, graduation ceremonies, fundraising benefits and other programs.

"This is one of the busiest rental facilities in South Florida," Barrett says. "The prices are reasonable, the location is excellent and free parking is just steps away. A lot of local organizations that need 1,500 seats can't afford some of the larger venues, and date availability is also a problem. We really fill that void for a large variety of Broward and Miami-Dade groups that need a facility to host an event."

Another advantage he cites is the center's full-time staff. "We are a full-service operation from box office to stagehands to operations," Barrett notes, adding that he and the staff work hand-in-hand with each local group to ensure the success of its event.

Also keeping the staff busy is the center's Institute for the Performing Arts, which offers musical theater and dance classes that culminate

in the staging of a number of productions throughout the year. Its summer performing arts camp, *Next Stop Broadway*, which Barrett says is the largest performing arts camp in South Florida, annually attracts more than 300 young people between the ages of 6 and 18.

The Coral Springs Center for the Arts is run by a private entity, Professional Facilities Management, which operates similar facilities around the country and uses its booking clout with national agents and promoters to make sure that the quality of the talent appearing on its stages is top-notch. "The city recognized a long time ago that private management makes a lot of sense," Barrett says. "When I came here eight years ago, the building was generating \$400,000 per year in earned income. That has increased to over \$1 million a year, which has reduced the subsidy from Coral Springs to its lowest point ever. The overall cost of the building has actually gone down."

But that is far from its only strong suit. "The importance of this facility in Coral Springs is the value it brings to the table in terms of culture. It is an asset to the community," Barrett notes. "When people are thinking about Broward County, this helps the City of Coral Springs sell itself to businesses and homeowners, along with good schools, great parks and other amenities."

ART FOR THE ENTIRE PUBLIC

While city fathers and mothers have made sure that these two important cultural institutions on Coral Springs Drive have continued to grow and prosper, they also began to look for additional ways to make a cultural impact.

"We have a very progressive commission," says Susan Hess, director of community development, who has worked for the city almost 30 years. Roughly five years ago, they became interested in finding

ways to introduce cultural elements into the broader community while also helping to enhance the local business environment. In 2003, they introduced and passed an ordinance that requires developers of private commercial and residential projects of a certain size to either incorporate public art into their plans or pay a fee to the city's Public Art Fund.

Approximately \$400,000 has been contributed since the ordinance went into effect, which thus far has enabled the city to purchase five monumental sculptures. Four have been installed along Sample Road (*Union One* by Kevin Barrett, *Sun Rising in Spring* by Celso Gonzalez and Roberto Biaggi, *In Harmony* by Hanna Jubran and *Rotate* by Jack Howard-Potter) while Doug Makemson's *Gator* and *Grebe* have taken up residence in the Sportsplex between Sample Road and Royal Palm Boulevard. The artworks were chosen – with active input from city residents – from among nine finalists that were displayed along Sample Road in 2005.

"The 'Sculpture on Sample' program was the first thing we started and has gotten the most attention," Hess says. Glenn Weiss, the city's senior planner, who shepherds the public art initiatives, concurs. "We had 1,200 comments logged into our computers in six weeks. People would drive up and down Sample Road. Some would call up and complain, 'I can't find the 10th sculpture.' I thought, 'This is my dream,'" says Weiss, who has worked in the public art field for 25 years. A new group of sculptures will be unveiled for public comment in November.

Another major milestone in the city's fledgling public art program was the recent dedication of *The Guardians* by Gustavo Vejarano – the first work of public art commissioned by a private developer as required under the public art ordinance. It's located at the Whispering Woods Center on Wiles Road east of Riverside

Drive. "One amazing thing about that project is that the owner (H&M Development) took an awful lot of care to make it beautiful," Weiss observes. "Once developers decide to do art rather than pay the fee, they do it really well." A second public installation, *Tropical Toss* by Kimberly Radochia, is due to be unveiled at the Village Green Apartments on Sample Road within the next several months.

And there's much more in the works, including artwork at the city's entranceways and a downtown pathways project that is expected to evolve over the next decade.

"A major difference between Coral Springs and other communities is that there's a full commitment of the city and the citizens to making art. They'll ask, 'What do you need to make this happen?' That is so rare within the universe of government," Weiss says.

"It's very exciting just to be doing this in our department," adds Hess. "I've learned an awful lot about what you need to do to get art out into the community. This has been very rewarding for us." ★

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