

Move over, Michelangelo

His artistic exploits in the Sistine Chapel are well chronicled, but the story of the seawall sculpture on Snell Isle is also a saga of creative derring-do.

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ST. PETERSBURG - The most beautiful seawall in the Tampa Bay area, if not the world, is in the back yard of Roger Gatewood, who lives at 123 Baypoint Drive NE on Snell Isle.

No boring, barnacle-covered, silverfish-infested, armpit-ugly seawall for him. He owns what has to be the Sistine Chapel of seawalls, crafted by a red-haired Michelangelo named Jane Chapin, a St. Petersburg artist.

Chapin, better known for her delicate landscape paintings, produced a 90-foot bas-relief sculpture that turned a seawall into a veritable seaworld. Inhabitants include dolphins, manatees, sharks and a variety of reef denizens. From drawing board to Tampa Bay took more than a year, 100 tons of cement and about \$30,000.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, who painted many of his famous frescos while sprawled on his back, had to contend with a demanding pontiff, Pope Julius II, during his four-year project. In a way, he got off easy.

"The tide and the hurricanes made it kind of tough for us," said Chapin, who learned to ignore oyster crabs, cockroaches and other scurrying creatures while she toiled.

Watching a perspiring workman advancing upon her sculpture with a crowbar recently, she said, "I think I'm ready for a whiskey."

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A developer and builder, Roger Gatewood, 58, bought his waterfront home two years ago. Gatewood expected to do the usual painting, tile work and minor repairs in his new home, but an engineer advised him to replace the 70-year-old seawall.

"I love living on the water," said Gatewood, an avid sailor and diver. "I love seeing the manatees and the dolphins. I wondered if there was something creative we could do with a new seawall."

Chapin, a close friend who also enjoys communing with the fishes, suggested a coral reef.

"Wow! What an idea," Gatewood told her. "But you'll never find a seawall contractor who can help you pull it off."

He was almost right.

Chapin, born in Pennsylvania in 1951, headed to the library to bone up on Florida marine life. Soon she was sketching at home. Eventually she put down her sketch pad and picked up a pound of clay. A small sculpture became the model for the final one, put together with fiberglass and plastic foam at Pinellas Park's Creative Arts Unlimited.

That work - a mold - was the backbone of the seawall.

Chapin wore out her button finger calling seawall contractors.

"When I told them what I wanted to do, there was silence on the phone," she said.

Eventually, she contacted a St. Petersburg seawall company, Dann Sapp and Son. The son in the partnership - Pete - said he thought her sculpture could be incorporated into a seawall.

"We have never done anything like this," he told her. "I've never heard of such a thing. But I want to try, even if it's going to keep me up at night worrying about it."

The seawall builder did lose sleep. But not as much as the seawall artist.

Tropical storms and horrific high tides put them two months behind schedule. Chapin all the while lived in terror that her sculpture would fall apart during the final moments.

Hurricane season ended. It was time to find out.

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First, a few words about seawalls in the Tampa Bay area. There are lots of them, 600 miles by some accounts.

Without them, many waterfront residents would have to live with wet feet.

But seawalls aren't necessarily friendly to the marine environment. They often replace native mangroves, whose rotting leaves and intricate root systems are key components in the marine chain of life. The decaying leaves are consumed by microscopic animals, which in turn are eaten by crabs, which are devoured by fish. It is the House that Jack Built as imagined by Captain Nemo.

"But if you're going to have a seawall," said Jane Chapin, "why not a beautiful seawall?"

Most seawalls cost between \$250 and \$350 per linear foot. To create one, a contractor first builds two wooden walls on the water and pours concrete between them. After the concrete dries, the outward wooden wall is removed, leaving what we know as a seawall. The Snell Isle seawall was more complicated and expensive. After wooden walls were put in place, Chapin's massive fiberglass and plastic foam mold was installed before cement was poured.

The next day, with Chapin taking photographs and resisting the urge to bite her fingernails, workers began prying the wood off the sculpture and the seawall behind it.

"See anything?" Chapin asked the crew chief, George Shepherd.

"Not a thing," Shepherd said. "Your sculpture's flattened out."

Quite a wit, Shepherd. The seawall turned out to be a fine rendition of a sea world.

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