

Muralist Chris Opp adds splashes of color to region

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Focus SB News

Muralist Chris Opp's world is filled with color and imagination. If you've ever seen paintings or portraits on the walls of public buildings — from the schools of fish on the Shreveport Aquarium building to the two Vikings on the north wall at Airline High School — chances are Opp's paintbrushes were responsible.

This past summer, he made a return trip to Margaritaville Casino to repaint the palm tree murals he painted years ago on the sides of the building.

"The one on the north side is 10 stories. We did that eight years ago, and it never faded because it's never in the sun," he said at the time.

"This side (the south side) is in the sun all the time, and I use special paint colors out of California called Nova Color Paints. They were formulated in the late '60s for the billboard industry when we used to paint billboards. So I guaranteed this for 10 years. This is seven stories right here.

"And then the one we're doing on the east side, that's 18 stories."

Of his art, Opp said he often talks to students to get them involved in his murals.

In what way? At Shreve Island, he said. "I painted a 19-foot bulldog, eight-foot high. I had 50 kids come four or five at a time and help paint. And then I did a school in Texarkana, at a sixth-grade school, and I had kids paint with me, too.

"I worked with the Texarkana Police Department, and I did a mural with a hundred kids during summer."

Opp said while doing a mural at Elm Grove, a man would pick up his daughter, Courtney, from school every day. Although she had cerebral palsy and used a mobile wheelchair, Opp asked if she would like to paint. When she said yes, her dad helped hold her hand as she painted the "R" in "Grove" for Opp.

"And so I get them hands-on to let them know, you know, God gave me a gift, and I'm fortunate making a living doing what I love. And when I go to work every day, it's not work, it's fun, and people pay me to have fun," he said.

"So I need arithmetic, I need English, and I need history. ... So stay in school and finish. If you want to be a fireman, a computer tech or an artist, you need all your subjects to be able to do what you do in life."

How long has Opp been painting murals? "Forty-seven years," he said. "I started my business in 1975, and I've been do-



ing the same thing.

"Years ago, it was casinos and restaurants, and I had 12 employees. Now I don't. I'm just more or less by myself, and I'll bring one or two people on board when I need help, but I pretty much do it myself. I just did a mural on the old fire station in Vivian; I did that myself. Belcher, I did a mural. Plain Dealing, I did a mural, to name a few."

How did Opp become so interested in art as to make it his career? "I've always been in art," he said. "My first pictures, maybe 5 years old, drawn on the dining room table. I always got an 'A' in art, and teachers always used me when they needed help with art. High school, I was into art, and then I left.

"Then I became a carpenter, and I did home remodels for a while. But in 2013, I was given Margaritaville, and all of a sudden my art projects started taking off here."

Opp is originally from southern California, where he painted surf shops and cars, including eight belonging to Burt Reynolds and Hal Needham, and Carroll Shelby's Mustang.

And that was only the beginning of Opp's brushes with celebrities. "I painted for the Beach Boys. I painted for John Wayne. I painted for John Lennon," he said. "I've done some pretty fantastic projects, and that was in California. I was doing restaurants and businesses and surf shops.

"Then I moved to Albuquerque in '89, and I started doing restaurants and casi-

nos, and then Hollywood (Casino) brought me here in 2000 after I did the Imus Ranch. I was on the Imus Ranch for a year and a half turning 21 buildings' interiors and exteriors into hundred-year-old-looking buildings."

Opp then painted for Hollywood Casino and later came to Evangeline Downs in Opelousas, La. He lived in Eunice for six months, where he experienced Mamou, Breaux Bridge and Lafayette Live.

While working at Hollywood Casino, he lived in the United Jewelers Building overlooking Festival Plaza, thinking, "These people party every weekend."

Opp started to experience "the food, the culture and everything here and fell in love with it."

"Then Eldorado brought me out, and after I was done changing the colors from Hollywood to Eldorado, Katrina hit."

He then traveled to Biloxi, Miss., for a year and a half, where he demonstrated his artistic talents at such venues as the Hard Rock Café, the Isle of Capri, Beau Rivage and Emeril's restaurant.

He then returned to northwest Louisiana and bought a home in Bossier City. Since then, he said he has completed more than 400 public art projects, including 27 schools just in this region, and more than 1,300 across the country.

"I was given a gift, and I'm making a living with the gift that God gave me," he said.

Did Opp have any formal art training?

"No," he said. He never went to art school because his parents could not afford to send him to college. Instead, he said, he got his lifetime teacher credentials in California to teach art after he took classes at UCLA.

"This day and age, you have the Internet, you have YouTube, but we didn't have computers. We did it all by hand. I used to do silk-screening. We'd cut our lacquer films. Now you call Vista Print, and you get it printed right away. But everything was done by hand. I used to pinstripe cars. I used to hand-paint cars, and now it's just all computerized."

Opp said he is one of a dying breed. "There used to be five guys in the '60s that people used to bring cars and roadsters and bikes to," including "Big Daddy" Ed Roth and Shakey Jake. At 68 years old, he said he's the only one around.

Does Opp have any particular subject that he likes to draw? "You know what? Frank Lloyd Wright was asked years ago — and I used to be a member of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation in Chicago — 'What's your favorite project?' 'The next one.'

"I never go back to projects I've done," he said. "I very seldom go back because I'm always moving forward on new projects."

When someone approaches Opp for a job, what is the process? Do they have an idea of what they want, or do they rely on Opp's judgment to create the final product?

He said he was recently hired by Caddo Commissioner Mario Chavez to produce a mural for a building he owns in the 1200 block of Marshall Street on the edge of downtown Shreveport. "I came up with a couple of ideas," he said, which he brought to him a few days later. If a client OK's the idea, Opp then finalizes it and paints it.

For the past two weeks, Opp has been working on the project, painting the entire building white and redoing the logo at the rear of the building. On one side, atop a green field, a silhouette of downtown Shreveport rests atop an open book with golden pages representing the Holy Bible.

Opp said, "Mario wanted the town coming out of the Bible because Shreveport has lost the significance of our morals, our convictions."

A plaque with a bible verse from Psalms 127:1 will soon be added: "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchmen waketh but in vain."