NEWS

New seahorse statue rekindles memories of Palmetto's past

Chris Anderson Sarasota Herald-Tribune
Published 1:31 p.m. ET Oct. 6, 2020 | **Updated 9:33 p.m. ET Oct. 7, 2020**

There's a reason the new seahorse statue is turning heads in Palmetto. It's a nod to the past.

The statue, unveiled last month on the north side of the Green Bridge in Palmetto, pays homage to the eccentric old Seahorse Gift Shop that was in operation from 1953 until the 1970s.

The current statue, which was designed by St. Petersburg artist Ron Berman and is 22 feet tall, was inspired by an original that was four feet shorter and a landmark in the city for decades.

Berman was commissioned in 2019 by the Palmetto Community Redevelopment Agency to create the statue, and since its unveiling just a few weeks ago, it has set off a firestorm of flashbacks on Facebook, said mayor Shirley Groover Bryant.

"On and on and on, everyone had a memory or a story they shared," she said. "It's been unbelievable."

The original seahorse statue was a beacon in the city, something travelers couldn't miss.

"It was huge," Groover Bryant said. "You knew when you saw the seahorse that was the icon that said you are coming through Palmetto."

The statue is on the corner of Riverside Drive and 8th Avenue, close to the original gift shop, and sits atop on 8-foot tall pedestal that is "Palmetto themed," according to CRA director Jeff Burton. The pedestal is constructed of red and tan bricks that symbolize the Carnegie Library and the city's original roads.

There are also a pair of reef balls at the site, very similar to those installed a few years ago on the reconstructed seawall that was part of a revitalized waterfront area.

The original Seahorse Gift Shop, owned by Ed and Evelyn Winter, had quite an interesting history, according to Groover Bryant.

The shop was known for the animals that were kept on site for visitors to observe, everything from monkeys to gators to rattlesnakes to a macaw named Scarlet. The bird was a local legend, and Groover Bryant remembers walking to the shop, holding hands with her classmates, to see the bird. It was a reward for doing well in elementary school.

Scarlet was so popular that the bird was actually kidnapped in 1982 and was later found in Indiana, according to a story in the Bradenton Times. Apparently it was taken by a child "who really liked her." The bird was found and then brought back to Palmetto. It is now another story the current statue rekindles.

"Out of the box people have loved it," Groover Bryant said. "It brings back such fond memories for people no matter where they grew up in Manatee County."