LOVE AND LEARNING

BY DAVID FUTCH

Photos by Paula Johnson



A young mermaid and "merboy" play in the surf surrounded by all things island.

Every manner of fish, bird, seashell, butterfly, frog, flower and plant are represented in The Island School's three-dimensional mural capturing the glory of Gasparilla Island. Crabs, octopus, and starfish punctuate the island's life of the sea.

Created by Mariana and Grace Alzamora of Tarpon Street, the mural is a tribute to the goodness of Boca Grande and will be the centerpiece at the new school building set to open in August.

The 100 x 2-foot ceramic sculpture was an afterthought when the school next to the Boca Grande Community Center was in the planning stages. The school's main room, with its 25-foot-high ceiling features a support beam about 10 feet up from the floor and the original construction contract did not specify how or what was going to be needed to cover it.

The idea of a tribute to island life so intrigued Mariana that she traveled from her home in Mallorca, Spain to help Grace and the island children bring the piece to life. So far, about 40 children from kindergarten through fifth grade helped make approximately 120 pieces based on creatures and foliage from land and sea.

"We wanted to create something to inspire the children," Mariana said, "and the children are helping us make some of the flowers, butterflies, fish, waves, frogs and birds."

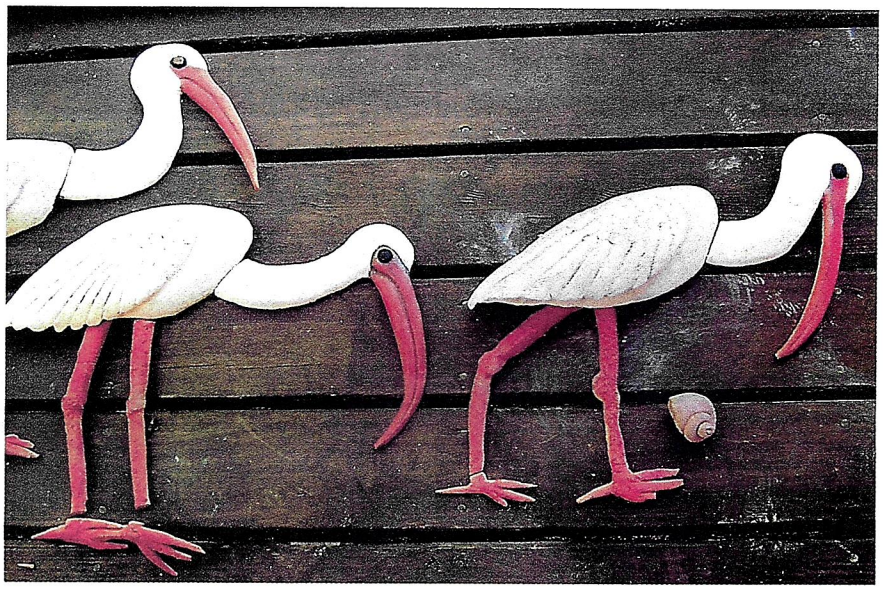
Grace added, "The children have learned a



Children from The Island School have been helping the sisters create the flowers, fish, frogs and butterlies.



Mariana and Grace



art and so have we. We've learned to work big and express ourselves in a bigger manner. More than anything, working on this project confirmed what we already knew about the island, a beautiful place rich in nature."

Nameless as yet, the Alzamoras are thinking of calling the piece Aqua Terra – Spanish for Water and Earth.

"There is a merboy representing the sea and a mermaid representing the island," Mariana said. "There is a full moon right before it sets in the ocean at first light: the beginning of a new day. Each child will see their pieces and they'll be there forever. Those at the school – Sue Sligar and Montell Marra in particular – want the school to be art oriented."

It was truly a labor of love for the Alzamoras, who migrated to the island from Peru in the late 1970s. The sisters and their late mother Jeanne maintained a home and art studio on Tarpon Street from the start. Many know the sisters and their work in a variety of media including silk batik, oil paintings, jewelry, ceramics and Mariana's three-dimensional "dream boxes."

Mariana's sons Daniel and Emil have completed the circle as both lean toward the existentialist side of life. Daniel concentrates on sound meditation and recently spoke at philosopher Deepak Chopra's symposium.

Emil is a bronze sculptor whose pieces have received critical acclaim. Two of his sculptures are featured in the foyer leading to PJ's Sea Grille in the old theater building in Boca Grande.

"All the love we have for the island is going into this work: the love of flowers, plants, and animals." Grace said. "Our mother, Jeanne, is responsible for many of the animals we've made because a lot of the pieces like the ibis came from her patterns. This project has taken on a life of its own."

And the children have embraced the concept.

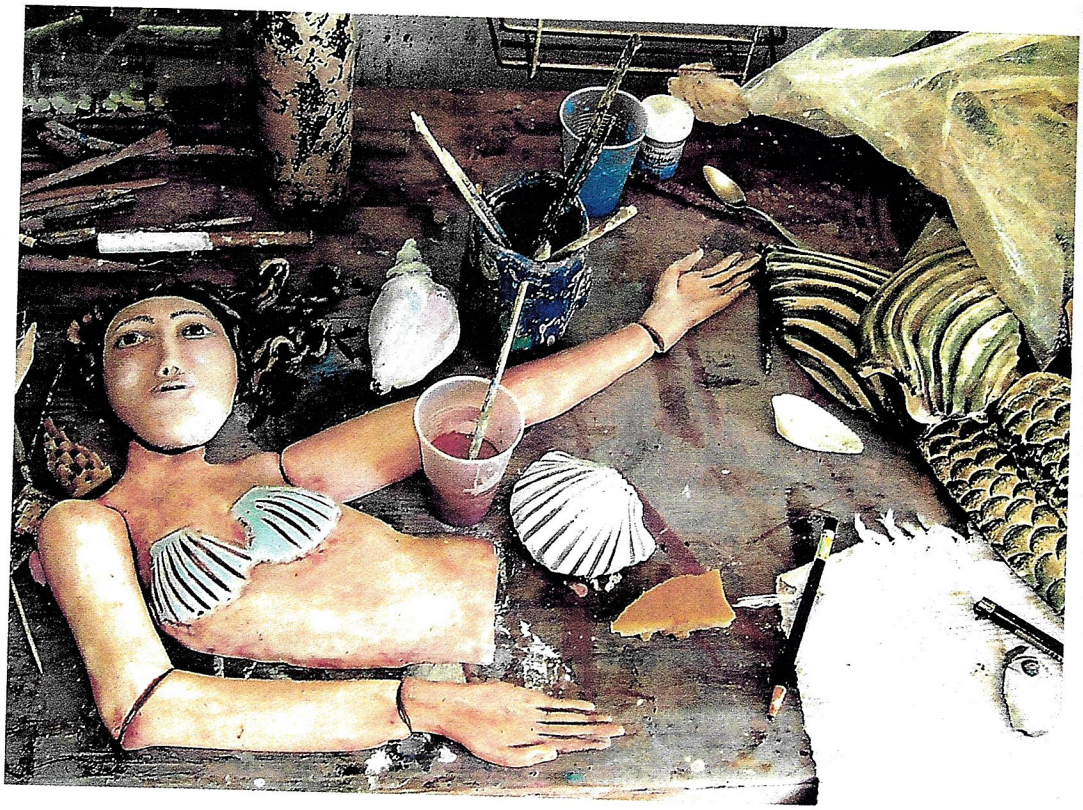
"Allowing the children to work on this puts a human aspect on the project," Grace said. "I think working on this allows them to feel closer to nature, to see how things in nature are made."

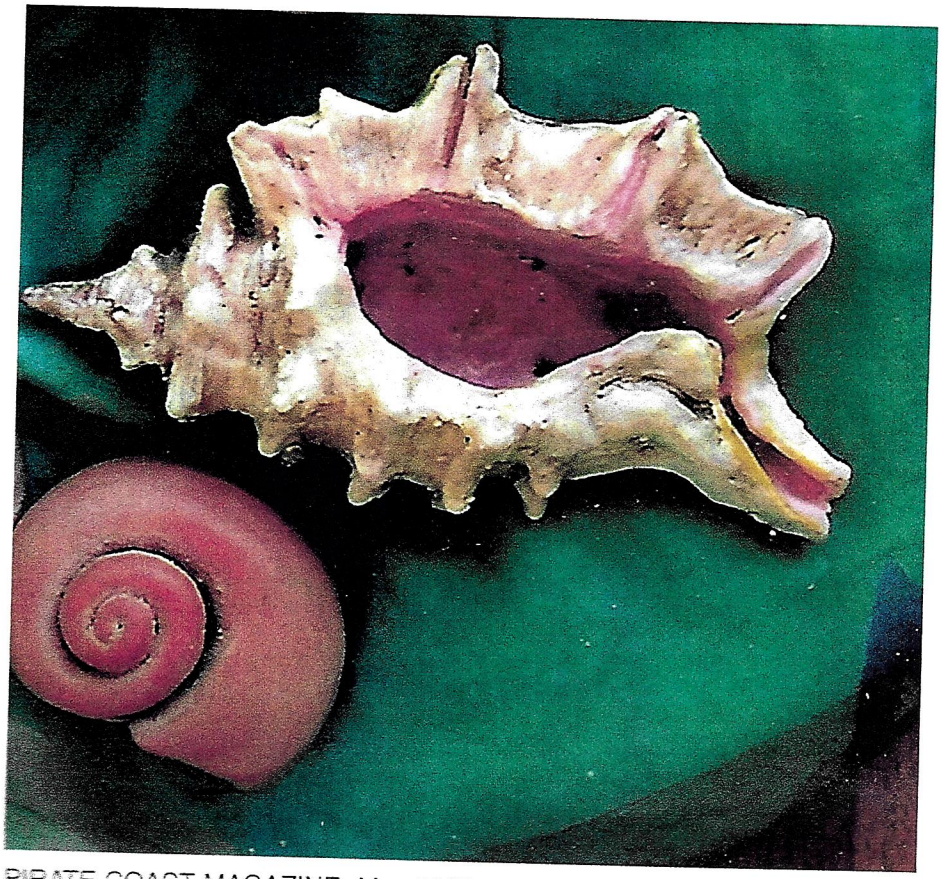
Creating the petals and leaves of flowers gives young artists a feel and respect for the natural world.

"We try to teach them not to waste anything because it's taxing on mother earth," Mariana said. "What we tell them is don't use too much paper or clay. Use the least you can." Minimalism at its finest.

"Foliage and trees are the lungs of the earth,"

Each element of the mural is a work of art in itself.





Mariana said. "And the less they use, the better off mother earth is."

Montell Marra, a descendant of the Sprotts of Boca Grande, has two children, Clara and Gabriel, and is vice-president of education for The Island School, which currently operates out of the Boca Grande Community Center with classes from kindergarten through grade five.

The idea behind the mural was purely happenstance.

As the new school was nearing completion, the school's board realized money was not set aside to hide and cover the support beam in the great room measuring 26 x 38 feet, or 988 square feet.

The contractor told the board it would cost almost $10,000 to hide the beam with stucco. There was a collective gasp.

Why just cover the beam with stucco? Why not make a lasting tribute to the island?

Sue Sligar wanted to do something beautiful in the main hall and Marra, who as a child took art classes with Mariana, called

the Alzamoras for help.

"This mural took on a life of its own and I think Mariana and Grace really wanted to do something for the children," Marra said. "Now that the piece is finished, we're in the engineering phase getting it hung and this is not the fun part.

"We have to decide what sort of glue to use or how to bolt it in place. Essentially it's a jigsaw puzzle. Now there is a lot of science and problem solving. We want to make sure it's still there in 100 years. And we have to make sure the children's pieces are integrated into the work.

"The children have enjoyed this as much as any of us. The mural allowed them to work with clay and learn the best way to make a flower or fish and how to glaze and fire these ceramics. They learned a lot about the life on the island, though many of them already knew a lot about island nature. Fish were big with the children, especially snook."

Sligar said the school is patterned after the Italian Reggio Emilia schools, which are designed with an open-air theme and emphasis on art and the arts.

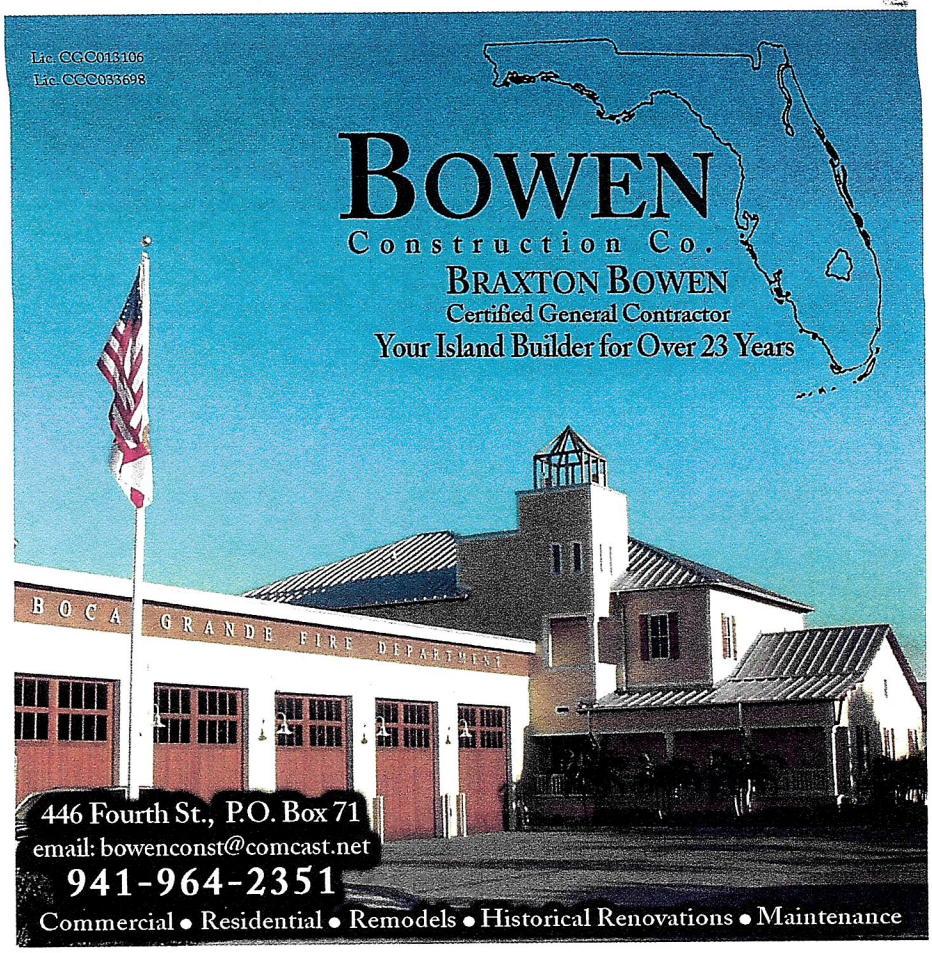
"The Reggio schools are very art oriented and value artists and their contributions to society," Sligar said. "A lot of the curriculum is based on art. We're not a Reggio school, but we share a lot of the same beliefs."

Russ Firlick was The Island School's first principal and along with his wife, Emily, was experienced in Reggio philosophy and design. They brought their expertise into the fold.

The central meeting room or piazza is where all the classes come together to visit before breaking up into their respective rooms.

"We wanted a space that wouldn't just be a place for desks and chairs. We wanted a place where we could hold not only classes, but a place for meetings and lectures and demonstrations and plays," Sligar said. "The mural is really going to set off the building which is very Mediterranean in feel but also very Boca Grande because everywhere you go on Boca Grande you see Alzamora pieces, whether it's on a sidewalk or fountains or in people's homes.

"Mariana and Grace are so special and they've given us something special that will be there for many years."



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