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LOCAL

Sea turtle sculpture at Venice Beach encourages recycling

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VENICE – It was easy for John Schwartz to smile Friday morning, as he returned from yoga class Friday morning on Venice Beach and spied the new interactive sea turtle sculpture unveiled on the north side of the pavilion.

“My grandchildren will love it,” Schwartz said. “It’s an interesting piece of art, it represents the beach, they love the turtles, it’s just nice here, it makes an ambiance to the area.”

The sculpture, which was funded by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation as part of its 25th anniversary celebration and built by artisans from Asolo Repertory Theatre’s Scenic Studio is made of aluminum and aluminum mesh and has three openings where people can deposit recycled plastic bottles.

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A companion sculpture will be dedicated this spring at Siesta Beach, and Gulf Coast has fielded inquiries about commissioning additional sculptures for Lido Beach and Manasota Beach in Englewood.

Though the original intent was for beachgoers to recycle through the turtle directly, that thought morphed to one where the can place cans and plastic bottles in a nearby recycling station and read about the importance of recycling and how plastic pollution has been impacting the environment.

Jon Thaxton, senior vice president for Community Investment at the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, told the small, masked and socially distanced gathering about how when he was growing up, his mother would buy mayonnaise in a glass quart jar.

When just traces of mayo remained, she would add warm water and shake it up to make coleslaw dressing.

After that, the jar might hold baby food, then later be used for pickled okra or guava marmalade. Eventually his father would adopt the jar and in the tool shed it would be used to store paint, or nails or screws.

“Ultimately, several years later, this mayonnaise jar that my mother purchased at Winn-Dixie would finally expire,” Thaxton said. “Today you go to the store and you buy mayonnaise in a plastic bottle.”

Too often, those plastic bottles wind up in the ocean.

“So much so that every minute of every day we produce and waste enough plastics and they find their way into our oceans and seas that if you were to take one of the Venice garbage trucks, back it up into the Gulf of Mexico and dump it into the Gulf – one garbage truck, every minute, every day,” said Thaxton, who noted that there are at least five huge islands of plastic in the world’s oceans – including one between California and Hawaii that’s as big as Texas and one between Hawaii and Asia that’s twice the size of Texas.

The turtle sculpture is one way the foundation is striving to raise environmental awareness, noted Thaxton, who also pointed to another recent contribution, The Community Playbook for Healthy Waterways, as offering tips for people to further ensure the environment is cleaner.

Venice Public Works Director James Clinch noted that the sculpture will promote awareness not only for the plastic issue but the value of recycling as well.

He noted that in the year since the city went to single-stream recycling, the amount of recycled goods collected has increased.

“While plastic is not going away tomorrow, the very least we can do is reuse it,” said Clinch, who went on to thank the Gulf Coast Community Foundation for the donation.

“The project reminds me of the sharks, the Positivity Wall we did,” he added. “It’s a uniting, community engaging project, I hope we can continue in the future.”

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The Positivity Walls were a brainchild of the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce, though the foundation will likely commission an artwork from the positive messages collected.

In March, the city unveiled a gift of 10 bronze sharks that Gulf Coast Community Foundation commissioned for what is now a “Shark Spotting” public art trail.

Thaxton referred to the craftsmanship of Bronzart Foundry in Sarasota as he segued into praising the work of the Asolo Repertory Theatre Scenic Studio in creating the recycling turtles.

“We looked all around the country for a fabricator to produce a turtle that would be the quality that the community of Sarasota and Gulf Coast expects,” Thaxton said. “Right here at home, we found the best fabricator we could find anywhere in the world, with Asolo – so thank you.”

Jeffrey Dean, senior property master at Asolo made the original model that the studio artisans then replicated on a grander scale.

“We went back and forth with the original concept and started looking around the world and how they were making these things for the beach,” Dean said. “That was the challenge and also kind of make it look like it’s kind of swimming, we had to make sure the head was mounted just right, to make it look like a natural position that a sea turtle would be swimming with.”

Vic Meyrich, production manager and operations director for Asolo later added: “This was really unique because we took this from just words – Jeff started out with a tiny toy model of a turtle and expanded it into a model that was big and created it.”

The turtle had to be made of aluminum to survive the elements but that, too, created challenges that Meyrich credited Asolo’s Shane Streight with overcoming.

“Aluminum doesn’t want to bend in arcs,” Meyrich said. “So Shane’s job was to engineer how to make what doesn’t want to be a curve (into a) curve.”

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The initial load of recycled plastic came courtesy of Venice Public Works.

Tammy Cable became the first person to contribute to the new station when she dropped in her water bottle after finishing morning yoga and before bicycling home.

“I think it’s good, it lets people know what’s happening,” she said of the sculpture. “I feel guilty having the bottle.”