

## Artists go public in new atelier space

BY KATHY GREY

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It's long been a dream of the Charlotte arts community to launch an atelier, or public workspace for artists. The French translation also implies "colloquium" and "symposium."

All these terms apply here, at the advent of the Artisans' Atelier, the latest addition to Charlotte's rich cultural community.

### What it is

The Artisans' Atelier consists of studios and workshops of artisans and designers, operating in what had been previously designated as display space in the Her-

ald Court Centre in Punta Gorda. The 2,490-square-foot portion of the structure is on the south side of the building and can be accessed from Olympia Avenue and from the Herald Court breezeway.

The atelier's studios afford artists space in which to create their art — space that's open to the public. The creative process can be observed, and the creative product can then be purchased.

### How it came to be

"This idea has been germinating in this community for many, many years," said Nancy Prafke, CEO of TEAM Punta



COURTESY PHOTO

TEAM Punta Gorda CEO Nancy Prafke and Punta Gorda City Council members Larry Friedman, Bill Albers and Charles Wallace, prepare to enter the Artisans' Atelier in downtown Punta Gorda.

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## ARTISANS

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Gorda, the citizen-driven group that had a hand in rebuilding the community after 2004's devastating Hurricane Charley.

The rebuilding movement had a decidedly artistic focus, and TEAM Punta Gorda partnered with art advocacy groups to further Charlotte's cultural offerings.

Last year, the city of Punta Gorda approached Mrs. Prafke, seeking TEAM's recommendations for the best way to use what could only be display space in Herald Court Centre.

Officials from the Arts & Humanities Council of Charlotte County and the Visual Arts Center eagerly agreed: this space would be ideal for the artisans' workshop — the atelier.

### A model of success

One U.S. artisan village in Alexandria, Va., served as a model for what local arts activists had in mind for the atelier. It sprung up in Alexandria, Va., in the mid-1970s inside a defunct torpedo factory. The vacant space was turned into workspaces for artists: an atelier.

The Torpedo Factory Art Center was a perfect example of taking dead space and breathing artful life into it.

Today, the Torpedo Factory Art Center graces the Potomac and attracts about half a million visitors a year.

Albeit more diminutive, the Artisans' Atelier project in Punta Gorda, operated by the Downtown Merchants Association, has its sights set on promoting Charlotte County as an arts destination,

attracting year-round visitors to the affordable atelier space its working artists occupy.

"This area will generate more traffic for existing galleries and other area businesses," Mrs. Prafke said.

### Why it's important

"Think of this in business terms as an 'arts incubator' for Charlotte County," Mrs. Prafke wrote in an e-mail.

Citing data from the Arts & Humanities Council, she wrote, "The arts bring people into communities, Arts and cultural non-profit organizations and audiences contributed \$21,184,165 in direct revenue to our Charlotte County economy in 2007. This equates to 512 full-time equivalent jobs; \$756,000 in local tax revenue; and \$1,357,000 in state tax revenue."

### Helping hands

Though TEAM Punta Gorda was approached for its ideas on how to effectively utilize the display space at Herald Court Centre, it certainly wasn't alone. A core group of visionaries set the concept in motion and contributed funding for the project, including the Downtown Merchants Association, the Arts & Humanities Council of Charlotte County, the Visual Arts Center, the



KATHY GREY / FLORIDA WEEKLY  
Artist Michelle Kante, creates "Taliah" paintings and wearable art at the atelier.

Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce, the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce and Mainstreet Punta Gorda.

Other supporters include the Punta Gorda Community Redevelopment Agency, which provided funding for the acquisition of partitions and signage. The Charlotte Community Foundation provided a grant to help outfit the space. Other organizations signed on as pro bono supporters, making the atelier possible. Architectural services were donated by the Alliance Design Group. Engineering services were contributed by TLC Engineering. Construction materials and services were provided by Owen Ames Kimball, Herald Court Centre's contractor, a company that states its founders' resumes were written in the lines of hardened, calloused hands.

### All aboard

Three artists have signed on to be the atelier's inaugural tenants.

Artist Dedo Christina creates papier-mâché statues that look like bronze. He

also paints and creates 3-D sculpture.

Literary artist James Abraham fosters the publishing experience for authors.

Michelle Kante, creates "Taliah" paintings and wearable art.

### Maintaining momentum

The project will be operated by the Downtown Merchants Association, headed by Jerry Presseler, in a manner similar to the DMA's successful farmers market. The DMA will promote the atelier, manage a juried selection process, ensure a fiscally sound operation and plan events to promote it.

"We are thrilled to see this amazing project come to be," Mr. Presseler said.

He acknowledges that without the group hug of support, the atelier wouldn't have been possible.

"It has been gratifying to see so many different groups pull together to accomplish this," he said.

"This project has been an amazing demonstration of what collaboration and partnership can produce," Mrs. Prafke said.

"If we were going to have to pull this off (on our own), it would have been a long, long fundraising effort. But with everyone pulling together and the generous donations of goods and services, we're there."

"And we're open." ■

### artist search

>> Space is still available at the Artisans' Atelier, open 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday, at the Herald Court Centre building in Punta Gorda.

>> Cost to rent a single unit is \$150 per month. Atelier tenants are required to work at least 24 hours per week during open hours. For more information, e-mail Jerry Presseler of the Downtown Merchants Association at jerry@pogdowntownmerchants.com.

### in the know

>> **What:** Artisans' Atelier ribbon-cutting

>> **When:** 5:30 to 7 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 11

>> **Where:** 117 Herald Court Centre, Unit 113, Punta Gorda

>> **Info:** Partners who made the project possible will be on hand. Wine, beer and snacks will be provided.