

## Confluence of river and art

**An environmentalist and artist teaches youngsters to take inspiration from, clean up and float along his beloved Hillsborough River.**

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### SULPHUR SPRINGS

Everywhere Ed Ross goes in his neighborhood, he sees beauty. He sees it along the Hillsborough River, which isn't too difficult. But he also sees it in the troubled kids he teaches art to and in the unfinished studio where the transformation of those kids slowly takes place.

A longtime fixture on the local arts scene, Ross has emerged in recent years as an advocate not just for the river that runs through his neighborhood, but also for another often overlooked resource close to home: the children who live nearby, most of whom come from low-income households.

In teaching them art, Ross, an adjunct professor at the University of South Florida and Hillsborough Community College, said he is trying to change their lives by giving them a voice, challenging them to think and helping them explore their surroundings.

His nonprofit program, Community Stepping Stones, started in 2003, gives the kids a place to congregate and create. Classes are taught in the studio under renovation, throughout the neighborhood and along the banks of the river Ross adores.

The program, which Ross runs with Michael Parker, one of his former teaching assistants, is his latest passion but not his only one. Ross has been a notable ceramic artist since the 1970s and has loved the Hillsborough River for even longer. He is active in Friends of the River and spends much of his time navigating the river, teaching about it and advocating for it.

He has lived close to the river since moving to Tampa in 1968. He considers it his duty to attend public meetings and forums regarding the river's long-term health but also to use it as a teaching tool.

He has integrated the river into his art classes. On any given Saturday, his neighborhood students can be found painting it, floating down it or even helping clean up the empty lots that border it.

Ross doesn't limit his focus to troubled kids and the river. Two weeks ago he spoke out against drilling off Florida's Gulf Coast at a public forum held by U.S. Rep. Jim Davis.

"The definition of democracy is active participation," Ross said.

At first glance, Ross appears to be a "classic '60s person," jokes City Council member Linda Saul-Sena.

But his ponytailed, laid-back exterior belies an underlying persistence. When Ross believes in something, he will gently wear down those who can help him get what he wants, not just with facts and with action but with a pleasantly coaxing manner.

"He's very pure, in the sense that ... he puts his energy into the things he believes in and he lives his life in a really integrated way," said Saul-Sena, who has worked with Ross on the city's Public Arts Committee and the River Roundtable grass roots group.

"He's very persistent, not in a naggy kind of way, but in a thoughtful way, which is pleasant. ... He is laid-back, but he's also very focused. That's one of the attributes of his success."

His Community Stepping Stones program focuses on kids ages 12 to 14. Its most visible project has been a 25- by 80-foot mural in Rowlett Park. The local youth designed and executed the mural, which was painted along the south wall of the park's racquetball courts.

The students' efforts have gained notice. On April 6 the mural won a public participation award in the Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission's annual design awards.

"(Ross') work with these kids is life-changing," Saul-Sena said. "It's not just that he's creating art in the community, which is valid enough. But he's really using art as a medium to help young people understand their capacity for being engaged in the world."

Saul-Sena said Ross brought along a student to the awards ceremony and "you could see the gears turning and (the student) was recognizing, I can do things, I can accomplish things," she said.

Those are the types of moments that Ross said he strives to help create.

"If you don't have that wonder in your life," Ross said, "then you stagnate."

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