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**Whimsical Pelican Statue Finds a New Home at Tarpon Springs Historic Sponge Docks**

The City of Tarpon Springs through the Public Art Committee (PAC) installed a jolly bronze pelican statue by local artist Mike Elwell, complete with a Tarpon Springs baseball cap, flip flops, pink flamingo Hawaiian shirt and comfortably seated on a bench with welcoming wings wide open. The whimsical statue looks as if it is begging someone to sit beside him. And the PAC hopes people will do just that. It is destined to become a favorite spot for making photo memories of a visit to the Tarpon Springs historic Sponge Docks.

Elwell, whose bronze statues have populated posh Beach Drive in downtown St. Petersburg for years, submitted a proposal to the PAC in October 2021 with a variety of bronze originals available. The Public Art Committee was immediately drawn to the Pelican sculpture Elwell titled *Catching Some Rays* since the Sponge Docks is a vibrant working seaport and attracts many live pelicans when the boats bring in their catch. The bronze pelican is located immediately east of the Tarpon Sponge Company, 735 Dodecanese Boulevard, an area where tour boats dock.

“The Public Art Committee is thrilled to add a new addition to the assemblage of beautiful bronze statues that enhance the City of Tarpon Springs by a number of accomplished artists,” said Public Art Committee Chair Joan Jennings. “Mike Elwell’s *Catching Some Rays* bronze pelican will add to the fun residents and visitors experience at the historic Sponge Docks. We hope the humorous sculpture will bring a smile to everyone’s face, be inspired by Elwell’s attention to detail and take home a photograph wrapped in its wing to capture the moment.”

“I want my art to say, don't take life too seriously. Try to find the humor in things."

- Mike Elwell

About the Artist:

Mike Elwell (b. 1942) is a bronze artist born in Wichita, KS and based in St. Petersburg, Florida.  For forty years he has created satirical bronze sculptures for public display.  Today, his large, eccentric animal bronzes that line the sidewalk of Beach Drive have become iconic representations of the St. Petersburg art scene.

    Elwell's art career began in the early 1970's, while he was working as a district judge. A wood carver friend of Elwell's developed Parkinson's disease and was no longer able to carve.  Elwell suggested making molds of his works and casting them in bronze, though neither man knew how to cast.  Elwell started learning by building a small foundry in Lawrence, Kansas.

    This was the start of the Ox Bow Foundry and Gallery, a commercial casting business that Elwell ran until 2010.  The foundry gave Elwell the freedom to make his own molds and cast whimsical bronze sculptures that were more offbeat than the mainstream bronzes of the time.  Ox Bow also gave Elwell the opportunity to trade with and collect a significant number of works from other regional sculptors.

    Alongside running the Ox Bow Foundry, Elwell renovated a historical building in Lawrence, KS in 1972.  This became Abe and Jake's Landing and Sculpture Garden, a venue that still exists today.

    Elwell became an important part of the art scene not just in Kansas, but in Colorado, where he spent summers.  He has been director of the Kansas Sculpture Association, President of the Lawrence Art Center, and a member of the International Sculpture Center.   Major commissions include works in the Douglass County Courthouse, University of Kansas, Alvamar Country Club, and the Wire Building in Lawrence, KS.

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His artwork has been shown in the Conquistador Gallery in Taos, NM, the Columbine Gallery in Aspen, CO the Margolis Gallery in Vail, CO, the Ingham Gallery in Crested Butte, CO, the Fourth National Bank Gallery in Wichita, KS, and the Red Cloud Gallery in St. Petersburg, FL.  Finally, Elwell has participated in the prestigious Loveland Colorado Sculpture Show, “Sculpture in the Park” for fifteen years, and the Loveland Invitational Sculpture Show for twelve.  other exhibition highlights include Best in Show at the Crown Center Regional Art Show in Kansas.

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Volunteer City Advisory Boards and Committees provide critical input from Tarpon Springs’ residents to the Tarpon Springs Board of Commissioners on several different subject areas. The Public Art Committee (PAC) was created by Article XVII: Public Art program, p. 287.00 to enhance the aesthetics of the community through the creation of works of art. The Public Art Committee consists of five members and two alternate members appointed for three-year terms by the Board of Commissioners.  The Public Art Committee adopts program guidelines and identifies locations for potential public artworks with the consensus of the Board of Commissioners; recommends a budget and expenditures for public art; and submits an annual plan to the Board of Commissioners. For more information, visit TarponArts.org/Public-Art.