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Depth of vision in Orleans



Artist Greg Johnson puts the finishing touches on his whale mural at the Orleans post office building.

Cape Cod Times/Steve Heaslip

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“I've got the time now,” Johnson, 50, said this week. “This is what I wanted to do when I was done teaching. I'm doing it now and hoping it will lead to other jobs.”

Over the past week and a day, Johnson has fielded compliments from passers-by from his perch on scaffolding outside the post office building. His signature, added yesterday, was the finishing touch.

“It’s so fun to watch the whole process,” said Lynn Comandich, owner of the nearby Beth Bishop clothing shop. “I walk up here every day, and this put a smile on my face.”

Johnson is well known in Orleans, where his family started summering in the late 1960s. He’s been a lifeguard for the past 31 years at Nauset Beach, a musician with two compact discs out and an artist whose distinctive quarterboard sign hangs over the Land Ho! Bar and whose breaching whales are painted on surfboards at Nauset Sports.

Johnson spent his winters as a teacher, working briefly at the Lighthouse Charter School in Orleans and spending nine years at Cape Cod Academy in Osterville. He left to direct Sandwich's recreation program before returning to teach for four years at Mattacheese Middle School in West Yarmouth. He was teaching health and physical education when he lost his job earlier this year in budget cutbacks.

“It was discouraging, but it gives me the free time to do this,” Johnson said, outlining the last whale's tail on the building's wall Monday. The mural on the otherwise white-brick wall created a square window into a tranquil underwater scene of shapely, dark-blue humpbacks on the move.

Building owner Maury Feigenbaum is paying for materials, and Johnson is painting for free.

Feigenbaum declined to give the mural's cost so far.

“We’re very excited about this,” Feigenbaum said by telephone from North Dartmouth. He has owned the building since 1998 and believes “this will beautify the area.”

Why whales?

“I’m an ocean person, and I’m fascinated by them,” said Johnson, who advertises himself as an “aquatic artist.”

When he lifeguards, he often sees seals and breaching and spouting whales through binoculars at Nauset Beach. His whales and sun-dappled dolphins look like they could swim off his posters, postcards and Web site.

“I like to make each painting absolutely as real as I can,” said Johnson, a self-taught artist.

His only other mural adorns a school wall in Sudbury but, in the near future, possibly a YMCA’s wall in San Diego. If he gets the West Coast job, he will paint a 40-by-10-foot exterior wall across from the Y’s Olympic-sized pool with killer whales, gray whales and bottlenose dolphins.

With four outdoor murals, Orleans is turning into a gallery of sorts.

It all started in the mid-1980s with the humpback whale and calf painted by Catherine Clark of Orleans on the 30-by-50-foot Kid & Kaboodle shop on Route 6A.

Two more murals were sponsored by artsLink, a nonprofit foundation created to open artistic

opportunities for Lower Cape students. Those two murals were painted by students under the direction of Orleans muralist Hans de Castellane.

Since 2008, Beethoven and Elvis Presley have shared the 180-foot-long retaining wall in back of Cape & Islands Tire, visible from Brewster Cross Road off Route 6A. Across the highway, the second mural, a beach scene of cottages and campers painted earlier this year, fills the side of the Blockbuster Video store in the Orleans Market Place.