

# Ragen Carpenter Randall Middle School, Hillsborough County 2024 NIE Teacher of the Year Honorable Mention

Ragen teaches visual arts at Randall Middle School in Hillsborough County.

Ragen was chosen as a 2024 Honorable Mention for integrating the newspaper into four cornerstone art projects that blend creativity and sustainability.

The first uses Tampa Bay Times feature reporting about murals to introduce students to Tampa Bay's vibrant local art scene and instill an appreciation for the stories that shape our community. The project culminates in the creation of large-scale murals by students, who work in teams to collaboratively design and execute the works. The material used is recycled bottle caps, encouraging students to reflect on their environmental impact.

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## Neighborhood Profile

### St. Pete's mural culture defines city's commitment to the arts, artists



**BY NICK STUBBS**  
Times Staff Writer  
Correspondent

It's no secret to anyone who goes around the neighborhoods of downtown St. Pete that the city is big on art—quite literally. From the Grand Central, Edge, M.L.K., Central and Warehouse arts districts and elsewhere downtown, huge murals grace the walls of buildings, making a bold statement about the city's strong art culture.

In downtown St. Pete is an outdoor art gallery, where the works of local, national and international artists are on display. And like a gallery, the exhibits are ever-changing, as other murals are painted over with new works.

"The city's annual MUSE Mural Festival is when many of the new murals are painted."

It is painted. The most recent festival was in Oct., when 25 new murals debuted. The rotation of new murals into the city is what helps keep the downtown scene fresh and vibrant. Believe it or not, says Jerry Marks, CEO of the St. Petersburg Arts Alliance, which stages MUSE, the wall over time the city's murals have helped define its character, and many businesses are embracing it.

"They want to be part of the street art economy," Marks said, adding that successful organizations also are jumping into the scene and using their own murals to "engage and beautify" their building facades.

"It is contagious," said Johnny Vitale, a muralist who operates Vitale Bros., a St. Pete art and mural studio that has been around since the infancy of the city's initial movement.

Not only are many downtown businesses clamoring for murals, homeowners in St. Pete have caught the bug.

"They want them at their houses, especially by their pools," said Vitale, who started his company in 1992. In 1990 there were just a handful (of murals) in town, now they are all over Vitale likes the way murals have evolved in St. Pete over the years as they aren't garish or "obnoxious advertising," nor are they "just graffiti," but rather "art for art's sake."

"Businesses use them to create an identity, but they are not blatant advertising messages," he said. "They are more like landmarks that people associate the business with."

Vitale said his firm stays busy these days, and because murals are so popular, he's adopted a simple policy of charging by the square foot. A simple design might be \$10 per square foot, while something with a lot of detail could cost \$40 per square foot. The works alongside artist-boosters

Photo courtesy of Vitale Bros.

Johnny Vitale, owner of Vitale Bros. muralists in St. Pete, said the mural culture in the city is contagious, and residents are commissioning him for murals like this one at their homes.

## The magical mural tour



Sebastian Coolidge's mural at Nebraska Avenue and 6th Street in Tampa. Mike Parker's "American Journey" adorns warehouses on Adams Drive between 17th and 19th streets in Tampa. Coolidge painted this near Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Nebraska Avenue.



By CHLOE TORRES SMITH | Times Staff Writer

St. Petersburg as part of the murals are popping up in around Tampa and St. Petersburg Bay Murals in Under



Photo courtesy of Lee Garcia



The second project explores public art as a critical tool for understanding the relationship between art and community. Students are introduced to real-world conflicts between artistic expression and community standards. This discussion extends beyond the classroom, touching on broader issues of freedom of expression, public space utilization and the societal roles of art.

The third project focuses on three-dimensional art and integrates a career component inspired by a Tampa Bay Times article on unconventional art materials. This unit not only hones students' artistic skills, but also broadens their understanding of art's potential to influence and inspire and introduces them to the many career possibilities within the art world.



The final project showcases how everyday materials can be transformed into significant artistic expressions by having students create 3D art projects with recycled newspaper. This project teaches students about the importance of ecological responsibility and empowers them to make a positive impact through their artistic endeavors.

