

She brought dolphins to public spaces and other Beach places



Anne Jones' dolphin complements Back Bay and the natural setting of the distant shore. LAINE MEDNICK RUTHERFORD

By **LAINE M. RUTHERFORD**, Correspondent, Virginian Pilot
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Virginia Beach dolphin watching isn't restricted to the water.

Catching glimpses of the frolicking - and painted, tiled or bedazzled - creatures across the city happens every day.

Sandbridge artist and photographer Cindy Graf, 49, is the brains behind A Dolphin's Promise. The nonprofit is responsible for the 130 dolphins that brighten private yards, public spaces and businesses.

In the early 2000s, Graf was hired to decorate mascots in other areas - fiberglass mermaids for Norfolk and horses for North Carolina's Outer Banks. By 2005, the Beach hadn't jumped on the city-decorated-mascot bandwagon, so Graf developed an idea, approached the city and made a two-year commitment to run the project.

"I saw a real potential to raise great amounts of money for a good cause," she said.

The project began as a legacy for Graf's mother, Pat Yakscoe, who died of colon cancer, to raise money and awareness of cancer. Ninety percent of proceeds raised by A Dolphin's Promise are donated to the Lance Armstrong Foundation, 10 percent goes to the Virginia Aquarium's Marine Mammal Stranding program. To date, almost \$250,000 has been raised.

Since its inception, Graf has run A Dolphin's Promise from her home. Collaborator Fred Greene III supplements her creativity with his organizational skills. The pair rely on a core group of Sandbridge neighbors and Graf's family to keep the dolphin pods growing.

The city supports the project, but Graf and company drive the dolphins south from the fabricator in Pennsylvania, arrange communication between buyers and artists, transport the dolphins from artist to patron, and install the creatures, which can weigh up to 200 pounds.

Greene gave an example of the group's commitment to keep the budget as low as possible: When the organization held its first fundraiser, a gala and auction in May, committee members hand-delivered invitations because they didn't want to take away from any money they'd raise for donations - even for stamps.

Oceanfront resident Andy Vakos lent a hand, taking over the dolphin-installation job in August. He mounted "Top Hat" in front of the Oceanfront Inn, a resort hotel he co-owns between 29th and 30th streets on Atlantic Avenue.

"The Top Hat was a nightclub my father and uncle ran in this location during the 1950s and '60s, so we thought this would make a nice tribute," Vakos said. "From the first day we put him in, people are stopping and taking their pictures in front of him."



What began as a 60-pound, unadorned Atlantic Bottlenose fiberglass dolphin model became an 80-pound, mustached, tuxedo-clad character with a top hat and bow tie. The dolphin bears the symbols that appeared around the interior of the Top Hat nightclub in its heyday.

Vakos created the accessories from wire and fiberglass. Local artist Terre Ittner and Vakos' son, Drew, 12, applied the paint.

It took two days to install the dolphin: one to pour the concrete that would hold it firmly in place, and the next to place it on the 8-foot pole and secure it against storms or theft.

"It's nice being the only hotel to have one right now, but ultimately, it would be great if every hotel down here had a dolphin," Vakos said.

This is the second decorated dolphin created by Ittner and Vakos. The first was in honor of the charitable beach organization The Robin Hoods, now known as the Noblemen. Wearing a cap and bedecked with arrows, that dolphin sits in an island of marsh grass in front of the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center, along with other dolphins.

Sandbridge resident Anne Jones also installed a dolphin last month on her lawn. It wears makeup, lots of jewelry and a pink bikini. Also on the dolphin are breast cancer awareness ribbons.

"I see her first thing when I wake up and when I brush my teeth," said Jones, an 18-year breast cancer survivor. "She brings me a lot of joy. I do think I am going to have more 'bling' added to her, though."

The commitment A Dolphin's Promise made to the city ends this month.

Members will travel to Texas from Oct. 12 to 14 to ride with bicyclist and Tour de France legend Lance Armstrong. There they'll present him with a check for his Live Strong project, adding to the \$125,000 donation made earlier this summer. They'll also give the Stranding Center a check at a future City Council meeting.

Graf said she does not have a figure for the Live Strong and Stranding Center checks because dolphin sponsorship orders are still coming in.

"We've taken two years out of our lives to do this. We'd like to see it continue," Graf said, with Greene nodding in agreement.

Ideally, they'd like the city to take over the organization.

Mayor Meyera Oberndorf says A Dolphin's Promise touches her on a civic and personal level. As mayor, she has helped support the project, eventually gaining City Council approval to adopt the dolphin as the city's official mammal mascot. As an 11-year survivor of breast cancer who lost her mother to cancer, Oberndorf said she feels hope and gratitude each time she sees a dolphin in a public or private locale.

"I think what it's done has not only beautified the area it's in, it has also brought a certain sense of communal responsibility," Oberndorf said. "This project shows people that there is a hope for light in time of darkness; it's something positive that people can look toward, right around the corner."

Oberndorf doubts, however, that the city will take over the project should Graf no longer continue to lead it.

"We're not set up to take over the selling and distribution of the dolphins," Oberndorf said. "If it's possible for the volunteers to continue to follow their passion, I'd hope they continue. We respect Cindy and admire what she's accomplished."

And while Graf would still like the project to support the aquarium and the fight against cancer, she thinks all proceeds should go to local organizations.

"We didn't care where we put our dolphins," she added. "It's not about the money, about the prestige or about getting our names out. It's about helping people."