



A mural by Sarah Painter and partner Cosby Hayes breathes new life into Crow's Corner. CROW'S CORNER

## New mural at Crow's Corner helps tell Highway 20 story

**Amanda Sieradzki** Council on Culture & Arts

**F**lorida's Highway 20 has long endured as a journeyed gateway between the state's past and present. It traverses between wetlands and rural communities and was a preferred route for travelers before I-10 cut across the Panhandle. • Straddling the crossroads of Leon, Gadsden and Liberty counties, and nestled between a forest of spindly pines and the vastness of Lake Talquin, sits Crow's Corner. • Owned by Mike and Martha Crow since 2003, this gas station and convenience store was a truck stop and meat market 50 years ago. The family business has become a community staple as it provides a steady supply of animal feed, home-cooked chicken gizzards and other goods and services to the surrounding area.

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# Mural

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It continues a legacy laid out by Mike's parents, the owners of Crow's Grocery from 1957 to 1968, followed by Crow's Bar in the 1980s.

The pandemic has slowed the steady stream of spring breakers and Forgotten Coast wanderers alike that frequent Crow's Corner during these peak months. However, the Crows have seized this rare moment to breathe new life onto the outside of the Corner's humble exterior with the help of muralists Sarah Painter and her partner Cosby Hayes of SPCH Walls.

"I feel blessed and fortunate that we were able to do this," said Mike Crow, who has wanted to see a mural go up for close to 17 years. "Right now, it will be good for people as they get back out and start traveling around to see something that they recognize as a landmark and gives them a sense of stability."

Though Crow and his wife are in the range of "at-risk" groups for COVID-19, he never considered closing down. It's an in-character decision for the store that has been a beacon of hope for essential workers during multiple hurricanes, most recently Hurricane Michael, that devastated the coast.

While many businesses have furloughed or laid off employees, Crow awarded bonuses to his "family" of workers, many who have been with them for a decade or more, and who have remained steadfast in the uncertainty of the past two months. Hand sanitizer stations line the interior of the store and Plexiglas walls separate the deli and cash register from customers.

Even as state restrictions ease up, Crow isn't letting his guard down.

"I'm putting up signs because you need to keep it in your mind," says Crow. "This isn't over yet."

Just outside, Painter and Hayes are transforming the store's facade for future visitors. The design took two weeks to generate after the Crows shared their personal stories and photographs of Lake Talquin with Painter. The resulting dreamy orange sunset dips into the lake as a young girl and her turtle gaze out from their dock into a backlit forest.

"I wanted to put a child in there to have a nostalgic feel," said Painter. "People who live in this area have been here their whole lives, if not for generations." Painter and Hayes graduated from Florida State University and have painted site-specific work internationally as well as throughout Tallahassee. Painter describes her style as natural realism, with each brushstroke revealing the essence or texture of a place.

A native of North Florida, she believes public art has the opportunity to commune with the past while opening new inroads for the future. Collaborating with the Crows, SPCH Walls is excited to showcase the unique splendor of the Panhandle's rural treasures.

"Our art is created for the people where we paint," said Painter. "A lot of people think of muralism as a way to revitalize an area, but don't know how to go about it. Our process forms a relationship with the clients and the historical research is important to creating a piece that reflects the people who live there."

Crow watched in admiration as the mural slowly came to life over a week. A former bricklayer, he could relate to Painter's fastidiousness as she re-sketched one section that he saw as flawless, but she wanted to perfect.

Before the mural was completed, he approved its final interactive feature — a testament to his playful sense of humor and a nod to the many iterations of the Crow family businesses. Each of the five distinct crow logos that adorned hats, T-shirts and little league uniforms are hidden within the final picture.

"You'll have to take a minute and explore through the scene to find them all," explained Painter, who said Mike insisted she not tell him where they are. "Ev-



Sarah Painter and Cosby Hayes are transforming the Crow's Corner facade with a design. The design took two weeks to generate after the Crows shared their personal stories and photographs of Lake Talquin with Painter. SARAH PAINTER



Owned by Mike and Martha Crow since 2003, this gas station and convenience store was a truck stop and meat market 50 years ago. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT



The signature crow of Crow's Corner on Highway 20 is included in the new mural created for the building. HANNAH CROW

eryone who has stopped so far has a comment or a question. Right off the bat, people are taking a moment to look at it. The fact that locals here are appreciating it has been really special for me."

Crow is hopeful the mural will help to bolster business and be a draw for travelers as the economy recovers. His daughter-in-law, Hannah, who helped to facilitate the mural process, feels introducing more instances of public art will give rural areas like Fort Braden a chance to shine.

"We felt this was a crucial time because there's a lot of unemployment and struggle going on and the hope is that this would go up and be a tribute to our area," she said. "It's an area that has become very disconnected, but there are no places that create a more lovable feel and culture more than Crow's Corner does, and people need to be connected. Art draws us together."

For more information on Crow's Corner, visit Facebook.com/CrowsCorner2003. To learn more about Sarah Painter, visit sarahpainterart.com.

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (tallahasseearts.org). This article is part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection, which highlights how our community uses the arts to stay connected and inspired during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Crow's Corner sits off Highway 20 nestled between a forest of spindly pines and the vastness of Lake Talquin. HANNAH CROW

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