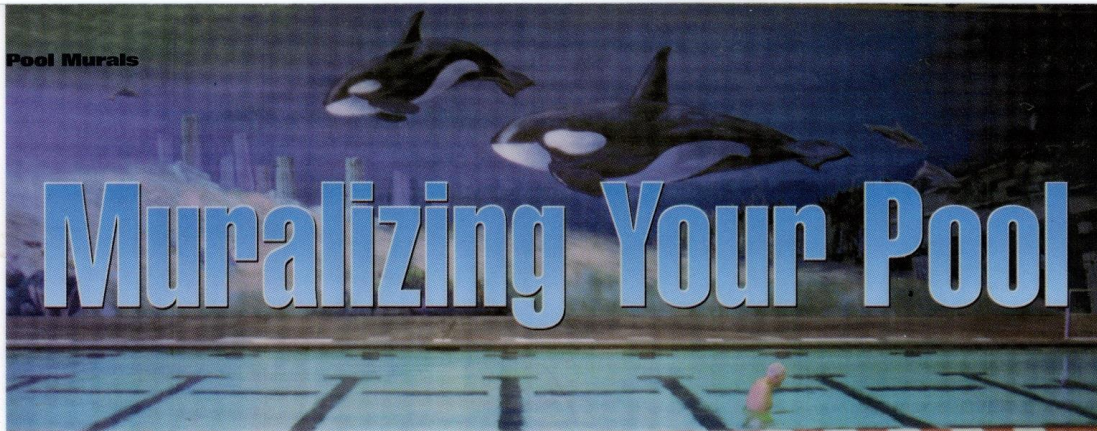


Pool Murals



Don Sweeney

# Muralizing Your Pool

Clients don't need to feel enclosed in your pool enclosure. This "Undersea Fantasy" makes the pool area as large as the imagination.

By Cecile Lethem

**I**F YOUR POOL area has been looking drab and needs updating, but you lack the finances to renovate, consider what the managers did at the Wakefield Recreation Center in Annandale, Va. They commissioned a mural that transformed their pool-area walls into a colorful, vivid undersea fantasy world, full of dolphins, fish, coral, killer whales, giant sea turtles and the ruins of Atlantis. The mural also served to engage the center's members in the project and, ultimately, has helped to retain them.

## Why paint a mural?

About 1,000 paying patrons keep the pool at Wakefield Rec Center in constant use each day. In addition to the public high school swim teams that are entitled to use the pool, private swim teams rent it for practices, general admission patrons swim laps, and 425 aquatics classes are held each year for swimming, diving, water exercise and lifeguarding. But to maintain the 20-year-old pool's popularity, it desperately needed to be spruced up.

"The bare walls were unattractive. They needed some color and life," says Charles Bittenbring, manager of recreation services for the Fairfax County Park Authority, who oversees the county's eight recreation centers. He thought a mural would help improve the pool's appearance, but because of budget constraints and lack of support, his idea languished for years. "Whenever the mural idea was proposed, we never pursued it, because the murals we'd seen were boring, like silhouettes of swimmers or Olympic contenders," says Patti Gibson, Wakefield's assistant manager. She finally volunteered to take on the project, but she wanted something exciting, and she got it. The mural, which covered just one wall, turned out so well that she immediately commissioned a second one for the opposite wall.

## Selecting the artist

Gibson wanted to find someone who could finish the mural during a three-week window when the pool would be closed for major cleaning and repairs. But most of the artists she interviewed said it would take at least six weeks to paint the 2,600-square-foot wall along the narrow end of her Olympic-sized pool. Gibson was also disappointed with the \$20,000 quotes, which was more than she wanted to spend. But she eventually found Tim Grant, who offered to

do the job for under \$10,000, and said he could finish it in 10 days, once staff painters prepared the wall (which took four days).

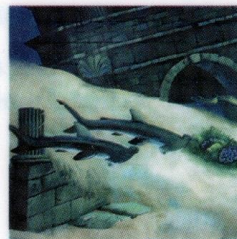
Grant is not a traditional mural artist, but an artist who paints backdrops for corporate events and theatrical productions. While most of the other artists did not appear to have the time or enthusiasm to take on such a big project, Grant was eager for the opportunity to paint something that would not be taken down at the end of the night. And his specialty had taught him to be fast. "We have fierce deadlines in the event industry," says Grant, who actually managed to finish ahead of schedule, working nonstop from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. "Some of the projects I do, I don't even have time to design, only to get a big piece of fabric on the wall and start painting. I just make it up as I go. So I've learned how to paint on that scale and do it efficiently. At Wakefield, [having] eight days is a lot of time compared to what I'm usually doing. It was nice to have the luxury of having the time for research, design and execution."

## Designing the mural

Once Grant was hired, he worked with Gibson and other Wakefield staff members to come up with the mural's subject. They decided on blending a colorful tropical ocean with the ruins of Atlantis. Then Grant drew a black-and-white, four-square-foot sketch of his ideas for the staff to consider. They decided to omit the potentially controversial statue of a nude man, buried to the waist in sand, and to add more dolphins.

For the second mural, Grant and the staff members initially considered a huge breaking wave, but decided it would be too much of a contrast. Instead, they continued along the same theme as the first mural, and turned to the pool patrons for input. Aquatic fitness instructors asked their students for suggestions. A comment box was set up in the lobby, and some people brought in photos of their favorite tropical fish. Eels,

sea lions, hammerhead sharks and the sapphire-and-diamond necklace from *Titanic* all made it into the mural because of patron requests. Grant pulled it all together, incorporating special requests into his planned framework. "I had already decided on the basic elements, what the shapes and the planes were. To



Cecile Lethem is a freelance writer in Falls Church, Va.

add a fish didn't radically change anything. In fact, it was kind of fun to think, 'Where would be a good place to put an eel?' I have it coming out of a sunken archway."

Eventually, Gibson would like a mural for the third wall, opposite the windows, to link the two murals and complete the undersea effect. For that, she and Grant envision more coral and aquatic life, maybe some manatees and steps leading up to Poseidon's throne room, with plants growing out of the cracks in the stone.

#### A worthwhile investment

Although it is difficult to measure whether the murals are attracting new patrons, they are probably helping to retain existing patrons, says Gibson. In any case, revenue is up. Although Wakefield is part of Fairfax County's Park Authority system, it is not subsidized. It runs solely on the fees it generates, so managers do worry about whether the cost of the murals was money well spent. "We're doing incredibly well this year," says Gibson. "We're doing *something* right. And maybe the murals have something to do with it."

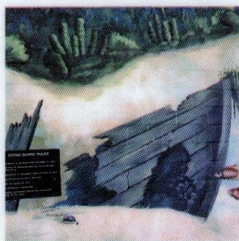
Patrons are certainly enthusiastic about their pool's new look. "The water exercise classes want the instructor now to stand in front of the murals, so they can look at the murals while they're exercising," says Gibson. "And during some after-hours activities when the pool is closed and the pool lights are off, people were looking through the windows, wanting to see the murals. They asked if we could put spotlights on the murals at night, so we did." The staff also got so many requests from patrons wanting to meet the artist that they organized a reception for Grant.

"To me, the most important thing is that I'm creating an experience," Grant says about his painting. "To go swimming in a fantasy environment that has color and imagery transforms the experience of swimming, and makes it a little bit nicer and richer."

#### Commissioning your own mural

**The artist.** What should you look for in an artist? The cost and time frame are obvious considerations, as well as finding someone with demonstrated experience in large-scale painting. Look at examples of an artist's work to make sure you like the painting style. A flexible personality is also key, warns Grant. Working on-site, unforeseen problems may arise, and the artist needs to be able to adapt. At Wakefield, Grant had to figure out how to reach around bleachers that could not be moved, and to compensate when he discovered that the floor was slightly sloped for drainage, which tilted his scaffolding away from the wall. "Working in a gym," says Grant, "[Means that] you might have to work special hours, or you might have to work around machines. I've seen it happen that an artist just got too finicky, and the project fell apart halfway through."

**Materials.** The artist must use the right materials so that the mural will be durable. "The pool environment really is just about the most hostile environment you can imagine," says Grant. It's harsher than the outdoors, because not only is it very humid, but the air is filled with chlorine and other chemicals that attack the paint. At Wakefield, Grant used a rugged industrial



acrylic paint produced by Briner Paints. He considered using an epoxy paint, which would also have been strong enough, but found that it dried too quickly, making it difficult to work with. Because the wall was bare cinderblock, it first had to be covered with a block filler to seal its pores. Then came an undercoating, then the paint.

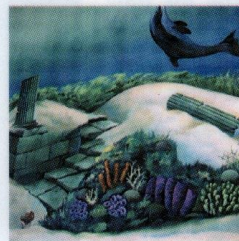
**Closures.** Do you need to close the pool during painting? Wakefield's first mural did go up while the pool was closed and other pool maintenance was going on. But for the second mural, painted three months later, the staff decided to have Grant paint while the pool was in use. "We were concerned about whether daytime hours were really the best time," says Gibson. "We had high school swim teams coming in to practice, we had dive teams, and the second mural was at the deep end. We wondered if the dive teams were going to be splashing on Tim the whole time, if it would be safe with the scaffolding and if little kids were going to be touching things. But it all worked out. We had no problems." As it turned out, there was a lot of splashing, but the water did not harm the paint. Splashed water did completely soak Grant's muslin dropcloths, however, which would have allowed paint to bleed through, so he had to switch to plastic dropcloths to protect the deck. Ventilation was good, so paint fumes were not too noticeable.

But the real reason painting during operating hours worked out, says Gibson, is that patrons were forgiving of the disruption. "Normally, when we paint the hallways or the activity rooms," she says, "We have to schedule the painters to come in after hours, because if they paint during regular operating hours, we just get so many complaints. With the mural, we didn't get any complaints. I think patrons were more tolerant because they like the mural and they like Tim."

In fact, seeing Grant in action turned out to be a major attraction for many patrons, who approached him to compliment his work or ask him questions. And all that conversation did not slow Grant down. Despite having even more detail than the first one, the second mural took him only a few more hours to complete, working from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. over two weeks.

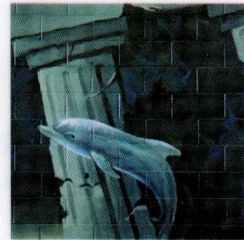
#### Transforming the exercise environment

Gibson has come a long way from her initial disdain for murals. She knew that if she was going to spend the money and effort on a mural, it was going to be something colorful and exciting, something that could make members feel like they were in a different world. With her success, she's turned into a cheerleader for murals and for the artist she hired. "I



think the murals were a good, cost-effective way to make a world of difference," she says. "They changed the whole environment [in the pool area]; it's friendlier [and] has a better mood. Patrons have their choice to go to any rec center in the county. The murals give them one more reason to stay here."

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Photos by Cecile Lethem