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“Front-porch community” is also arts colony

By [Mike Salmon](#)

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Along Mount Vernon Avenue, the main street of Del Ray, the art gallery-boutique-café atmosphere fuels the economic and cultural engine that drives the heart of this distinctive Alexandria neighborhood.

Tree-lined streets display homes that add character, but it’s the residents who bring Del Ray to life. Pat Miller, co-owner of a Show of Hands art boutique with Maria Wasowski, was one of the driving forces behind the proliferation of artists on Mount Vernon Avenue. She started the Arts on the Avenue event back in 1995, focusing on the need for retail businesses and also spotlighting the community. Both features enhance the commerce and real estate.

Now a wide variety of ethnic restaurants and a streetscape splashed with pastels gives the community an urban feel. “We are not afraid to put paintings on the buildings,” Miller said. “We’ve got absolutely smashing restaurants that are kind of our pulse of the community.” She calls it “a front porch community,” she added.



Times Staff Photo/Mike Salmon

Biking and walking are popular among Del Ray residents like Mark Walker, who is locking his bike to one of the posts outside St. Elmo’s Coffee Pub, a popular gathering place.



Times Staff Photos/Mike Salmon

Brett Rice built this house to resemble the older homes around it from the outside, although it will be filled with modern conveniences within.

It is certainly one that supports its local artists and crafters.

Show of Hands is in the 2200 block of the avenue. The same street also houses the Alexandria Volunteer Bureau, a website creation business called Bean Creative, Vital Body and Mind Therapies, and Juxtapose Fashion, Finds and Funk, with advertisements that urge the public to “come find yourself.” Back at Pat’s shop, the offerings include jewelry, pottery, art, frames, handbags and birdhouses – 90 percent made by local artists.



The founder of Del Ray’s Art on the Avenue event, Pat Millar peers through a shelf of colorful handmade tea cozies in her own shop, a Show of Hands, where many of the offerings were made by local artists.

Around the corner is Artfully Chocolate, where most of the popular truffles are made by local chocolatiers. The owner, Eric Nelson, also creates pictures using a combination of painted foil and a plastic-like metallic coating of Mylar.

Ameri Vermillion was showing her friend Danielle Rappel all that Del Ray had to offer. Coming from Maryland, Rappel she she hasn’t experienced anything like this at home.

“This is the artistic section of the City of Alexandria, you can’t prefabricate that,” she said. Vermillion and Rappel browsed inside Eight Hands Round that offers everything from baby toys to antiques to pajamas, with some merchandise displayed on the sidewalk.

Behind the counter, Linda Lawhorne said she is a local with roots going back to T.C. Williams High School. Her husband is also a T.C. alum, and her two children currently attend the school. “People just feel comfortable here; it’s homey,” she said.

Across the street, St. Elmo’s Coffee Pub doubles as the hip community gathering spot.

The Del Ray Artisans is an organization dedicated to fostering this community of artists and art supporters. They are a viable source for the development, teaching, and furtherance of art appreciation through exhibits and events for members and the diverse populations throughout the area, as stated on their newsletter “The Well Crafted Word.” Formed in 1992, the group has now grown to 275 members from all over the area. The president, Linda Elliff, lives in the Fort Hunt area of Alexandria. Her own creations include jewelry and collage mirrors, some of which are displayed in Miller’s shop.

Elliff called Del Ray an eclectic mix of people and housing. “All sorts of people are drawn to Del Ray,” she said.

The artists are inspired by each others’ creativity also, Elliff added. At their annual card making fundraiser, “the ideas just start flowing, they bounce off each other.” On Friday, Aug. 3, four of the artisans kicked off “Mashup: Solos and Collaborations,” art show consisting of pottery, jewelry, monoprints and encaustic painting at the Del Ray Artisans Gallery at 2704 Mount Vernon Avenue. The artists in Mashup include Barbara Boehm, Juli R. Branson, Elliff and Joan Ulrich. The display will continue every weekend in August, and 20 percent of the sales will go to support the Del Ray Artisans group.

Long and Foster agent Jim Crowe finds that clients are attracted to the community appeal of Del Ray. The smaller houses, smaller streets and proximity of businesses are “the things that attract them,” he said. Nearly half his listings are in the community, and he was a resident until moving recently to the Beverly Hills neighborhood a few blocks away. Still, he finds himself setting up meetings at Del Ray cafes, going to the restaurants, and stopping by the Dreamery Frozen Custard shop for a cone with his family.

“It’s a great main street along Mount Vernon Avenue,” he said.

RE/MAX agent Brett Rice bought a lot in Del Ray, where he is in the process of tearing down the old house and building a new one that still preserves the area’s character. He is finalizing the plans for a farmhouse style home that’s “going to be the same footprint,” of the original dwelling.

Rice recently built another house in Del Ray with similar features and when he held open house events, people thought it was an old house with an addition. “You don’t want it to look like some monster big house,” he said.

Amy Slack, the land-use chairman on the Del Ray Citizens Association, doesn’t want to see “monster houses” either. But she explained that Virginia is a by-right state, where owners have wide discretion in building homes on their property, so she tries to compromise as much as possible. “Everybody is going to have a different priority,” she said. Gone are the days when families shared bedrooms, the kitchen was also the dining room and a home office was almost unheard of. “That’s not how it is these days,” she said. Although some people won’t compromise, “you can only hope that people that are attracted to the neighborhood are sensitive,” she said.

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