

*"Only the sun covers more of Clearwater"*

# CLEARWATER GAZETTE

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## Life is a Silas Beach

*Photo/Text by Donna Malloy*



**Herpetologist and Artist.** Local artist Silas Beach holds his 5-foot-long cyclura iguana in front of the original Frenchy's on Clearwater Beach. In background is his "fish" mile marker signage which was commissioned by the city.

Beside Mother Nature, not many artists can claim public exposure to their work on a daily basis. But local artist Silas Clifton Gatewood, alias Silas Beach, can. For twenty-seven miles, from Clearwater Beach to St. Petersburg Beach, motorists cruising down Gulf Boulevard breeze by Silas' art every day. His colorful "fish" mile markers are a true testament to his enduring artistic talent.

A Florida cracker, baby boomer Silas was born in St. Petersburg in 1952. As a child, Silas was enamored with nature. His knowledge and "fascination of creatures" influenced his parents to invest in a pet shop when Silas was in high school, stated Silas.

Although Silas briefly studied Zoology in college, his free spirit could not be contained for long inside the four classroom walls. Naturally, his first job was at the former Aquatarium in St. Petersburg beach, three blocks away from the London Wax Museum.

"I'd do anything to work at an animal tourist attraction" stated Silas. True to his word, Silas began working with the maintenance crew at the Aquatarium. Then one day he noticed the artist employed

by the underwater aquarium and thought: "I could do better than that!" Working in acrylics, Silas picked up his paint brush and has never put it down. Silas' favorite subject to paint is colorful palm trees, evidenced on his website:[www.silasbeach.com](http://www.silasbeach.com).

It didn't take long for the owner of the Aquatarium to promote Silas to the care of the dolphins and sharks. But never one to stay in one place too long, Silas was then hired by the famous Sunken Gardens tourist attraction in St. Petersburg. Again, he was willing to commence work as a maintenance man with the understanding he would graduate to animal training in the future.

Recognizing his natural talents, in no time Silas was "training all the exotic birds" at Sunken Gardens. "I practically ran the place" stated Silas. But after five years at Sunken Gardens, it was time for Silas to set sail for Costa Rica in his Morgan Outland 41. Sailing kept Silas entertained for about a year, but as they say, all good things must come to an end. Silas returned to Florida in the mid-1970's to Pinellas County.

A chance meeting with John Baird, the "epicenter of Ann Arbor, Michigan relocaters" brought Silas face to face with co-owners Mike Preston and the former Peter Lawson of Frenchy's restaurant on Clearwater Beach. From that day forward, Silas has been responsible for all of Frenchy's advertising images, from logos, murals and t-shirts, to table tops.

Silas' most recent creation is the children's mural at Sandpearl on Clearwater Beach. Together with partner Johnny Castleseed, the two artists created an underwater paradise complete with a larger than life size Kemp ridley turtle and various sea anemones.

In order to achieve the proper fluid effect of the sea, Silas and Castleseed spent two days smoothing out the rough plaster finish on the wall before they started painting. The underwater scene is located on the ground floor at the Camp Ridley day care center at Sandpearl.

"When children enter the room, we hear a lot of 'oohhhs and ahhs' from both the children and their parents" stated Tara Malone, Director of Activities at Sandpearl. "You can just feel the energy" Malone continued.

"When I die they're going to name something after me here" Silas stated as we walked down Mandalay Avenue.

"Why would they wait until you die to do that?" I asked.

"Because, that's what they do; they wait until you die" answered Silas.

But in the meantime, Silas continues to paint and enjoys taking care of his fifteen large iguanas and land tortoises in his jungle paradise he calls home.