



ANIMALS

# Not just a mascot: The real owls of Florida Atlantic are underdogs too.

The unlikely NCAA Men’s Final Four team shares a campus with the burrowing owl, which has seen its numbers dwindle across the Sunshine State.

A burrowing owl in Florida peeks out from the entrance to its burrow. The owls are the only raptors to live underground and they thrive on the campus of Florida Atlantic University. PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM VEZO, MINDEN PICTURES

BY UMA RAJA



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The Florida Atlantic University Owls, the surprise team playing in the NCAA Men’s Final Four basketball tournament on April 1, has a few things in common with its feathered mascots: They flock together—and they are underdogs.

As FAU point guard Bryan Greenlee [told ESPN](#): “It’s probably the first team I’ve been on where really nobody cares about their stats. I feel like across the board, any game it’s just a whole bunch of selfless guys just trying to get a win.”

The Owls are named for the Florida burrowing owls that thrive on the urban FAU campus in Boca Raton. A threatened species in the state, habitat loss has dwindled their estimated numbers across Florida to less than 10,000, according to Carli Segelson at Florida Fish and Wildlife.

Efforts such as those at FAU, designated as a burrowing owl sanctuary by the Audubon Society in 1971, have made a difference for local populations of the species. In a January 2023 assessment, 53 burrows were counted on campus, with an estimated 34 owls living in them.

“The owls are adapting to live side by side with us in Southern Florida,” says avian biologist Kelly Heffernan, founding director of the Florida burrowing owl nonprofit Project Perch.



A family of very alert burrowing owls huddle on a summer day in the Florida Everglades. There are estimated to be less than 10,000 of the owls in the state, due largely to habitat encroachment and rat poison, which the owls ingest with the mice they eat.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK ANDREW THOMAS,  
ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

## Burrowing owl backstory

Burrowing owls, standing about nine inches tall, prefer tunnels in open grasslands to trees and are the only North American bird of prey to nest underground.

FAU’s burrowing owls live on four preserved areas of campus, one just northeast of where the Owls play in a small arena nicknamed The Burrow. The real mascots perch on posts and watch students with yellow eyes. The specks on their tawny bodies blur as they fly low and zip into their sandy holes like rabbits.

The owls dig their own burrows or move into unoccupied tunnels made by gopher tortoises, another threatened species that lives on FAU's campus. Students can walk five minutes from the science building to study the burrows, which inspire a number of master's and doctoral theses, says [Sandra Norman](#), a history professor at FAU.

"When students do learn that we have burrowing owls on campus, they get quite excited to find out that they're there," says FAU history professor [Evan Bennett](#). "It has created a nice sense of place and a nice connection to the environment."

## The mascot's history

FAU opened in 1964 as an upper-division and graduate school with an enrollment of 867 students, a focus on technology, and no intercollegiate sports teams. It introduced sports after becoming a four-year university in 1984.

The owl was chosen as a mascot because of its presence on campus, but also as a symbol of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, says [Norman](#), who has served on FAU's conservation committee for 35 years. Norman recalls a consultant pushing a new mascot after the football team was established in 2001, claiming the owl was "a negative" because "it's got its head in the sand."

The consultant proposed a new mascot: the FAU sharks. "Everybody rose up and said, 'get out of here'," Norman says. "The students, the faculty, the alumni, they said, 'We love our owls'."

Sports-team animal mascots are often inaccurate or generic. But FAU's mascot has "the characteristics of a burrowing owl rather than a barn owl or what people expect an owl to look like," says Bennett.

## Where owls rule

The owls determine where FAU can construct new buildings, and even how the school cuts its grass. Areas densely populated by owls are weed-whacked by hand four times a year, while maintaining a 33-foot distance from all burrows during the breeding season.

Florida wildlife policy requires a permit to develop property on land with owl burrows. If nesting activity is not present, the burrow is filled with dirt, a process Heffernan refers to as "evicting an owl." Permits to do that cost \$1,900. Creating artificial or starter burrows for the homeless owls can drop the price to \$600.

But not everyone follows the rules: Burrows are often illegally crushed by excavators to avoid permit fees, says [Brittany Piersma](#), a field biologist who studies the burrowing owls across the state on Marco Island, the second largest population behind Cape Coral. Owls have been buried alive

or had their homes stuffed with rocks. In 2019, a security camera recorded a Marco realtor fumigating a burrow with mothballs.

Rat poison has also contributed to the owls’ population decline because rodents are a large part of their diet. A family of burrowing owls can consume 1,000 mice in a single nesting season, Heffernan says.

While FAU has now grown to over 30,000 students, its tiny ground owls remain a unique part of the school’s history and environment. And as a school where 80 percent of students commute, the burrowing owls—like the basketball team itself—add a sense of unity, spirit, and togetherness.

“Fierce little raptors—they’re a true mascot of the campus,” Heffernan says.



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A bunny takes a well-deserved nap at Gainesville Rabbit Rescue. Rabbits have a third eyelid, allowing them to sleep with their eyes open to watch for predators. For a rabbit to fully close its eyes, it must feel truly safe in its environment.

Bunny Barn in nearby Williston, where Cocoa gave birth to her eight babies.

Visiting the Bunny Barn entails a peaceful drive past pastures of grazing cattle. The quaint blue barn is embellished with rabbit-themed decor. Sunlight beams through the leaves of broad oak trees. A cat reclines on a tree stump, its tail swishing with curiosity. Peacocks strut by like rulers of a palace, and a miniature horse whinnies from the backyard.

Entering the barn, the crisp scent of hay hits your nose. You might be surprised to see 42 rabbit cages filled with creatures that are both silent and odorless. There are bunnies of every size and color, from Rooster, the 5-pound Dutch rabbit, to Mushroom, the 13-pound Flemish giant. Some cages are adorned with badges that read "I BITE" or "NO EXERCISE." Many rabbits splay their legs out in relaxation. Others slumber with their paws tucked beneath them like loaves of bread. Babies, no bigger than the palm of your hand, hop into the air with cartoonish enthusiasm. An albino rabbit watches you with ruby-red eyes and a twitching nose.

Kathy Finelli, the director of the group, says Cocoa's rescue was a labor of love. The organization runs on a team of volunteers. They don't get paid for what they do; instead, they get rewarded with bunny affection.

"Once they get to know you, when you walk around, they come to you," Finelli says. "They're just happy to see you."

Finelli became charmed by bunnies two decades ago, when she found a domestic rabbit wandering in her backyard. She joined Gainesville Rabbit Rescue in 2002, and since then, she has made rabbit welfare her life's mission.

The organization was founded by

# Rabbit Rescue

Essay by  
UMA RAJA  
Photos by  
ANDERSON  
BOBO

*There's a bunny on my couch.  
She's one of the lucky ones.*

If a rabbit makes one mistake, it's dead. Life is brutal for these innocent creatures, who serve as the perfect entrée for almost every predator and are constantly abused and neglected as pets.

I should know. I've fostered two rabbits since 2019 and am now a mom to Cocoa.

A phrase I often hear: "There's a rabbit on your couch. A *big* rabbit."

For the record, Cocoa isn't big; she's fluffy. But I don't know why anyone would comment on a lady's weight in the first place.

There are a lot of things people find

surprising about Cocoa. Instead of sleeping in a cage or an outdoor hutch, she roams freely around my apartment. She lives like a princess in her castle-shaped home and naps in my sock drawer. She's fully litter-box trained and hops around the furniture as she pleases. She demands head pats with a gentle nuzzle and shows gratitude with tiny kisses. Cocoa even had her own birthday party with a strict bunny-ear dress code.

While Cocoa is now living the life of the rabbit bourgeoisie, her story wasn't always endearing. She escaped a hoarding situation in which 60 neglected rabbits lived in a cramped backyard, constantly breeding. Many dug under the fence and were hit by cars.

Cocoa got lucky. The nonprofit Gainesville Rabbit Rescue plucked her from the yard and brought her to the



Kathy Finelli joined Gainesville Rabbit Rescue in 2002 and has been the director for the past eight years. Finelli found a domestic rabbit in her backyard 20 years ago, who she named Mr. Bunny. That chance encounter started a lifelong passion for rabbit activism.

two University of Florida students in 1998. Cages were added to an unused horse barn, and it became the base for the nonprofit in 2014.

Gainesville Rabbit Rescue spays, neuters and litter-box trains all its rabbits. Adopting one costs \$100. Rabbits are considered exotic pets, so it's a bargain considering that spaying a female can cost up to \$400. The rescue loses money on every adoption, but the monetary deficit is a small price to pay for the well-being of these underrated companions.

Finelli says that one of the main misconceptions people have about rabbits is that they're not as intelligent as cats or dogs.

"I feel the opposite; they might be even smarter," Finelli says. "If a cat or a dog makes a mistake, they go hungry. As the prey animal, if a rabbit makes the mistake, they're dead."

In order to stay alive, Finelli says rabbits need to constantly outsmart predators. So, contrary to popular

belief, they are highly intelligent, as well as social and quiet, which makes them ideal pets.

I can attest that a rabbit's curiosity often gets them into trouble. Before I adopted Cocoa, I fostered a tiny Netherland Dwarf bunny named Mochi. She had bright blue eyes and was found running loose in a park. Mochi was terrified of people. Watching her flop on the ground and expose her belly to me, the ultimate form of trust in a rabbit, flooded my mind with joy.

One day, I woke up and Mochi had vanished from my apartment. I frantically rearranged all my furniture and even called the Gainesville Police Department to file a stolen pet report.

As I taped lost pet posters around my apartment complex with tears in my eyes, I was surprised to find a large hand gently resting on my shoulder. I turned to see a typical fraternity gym bro, decked out in a muscle tee and a baseball hat worn backward.

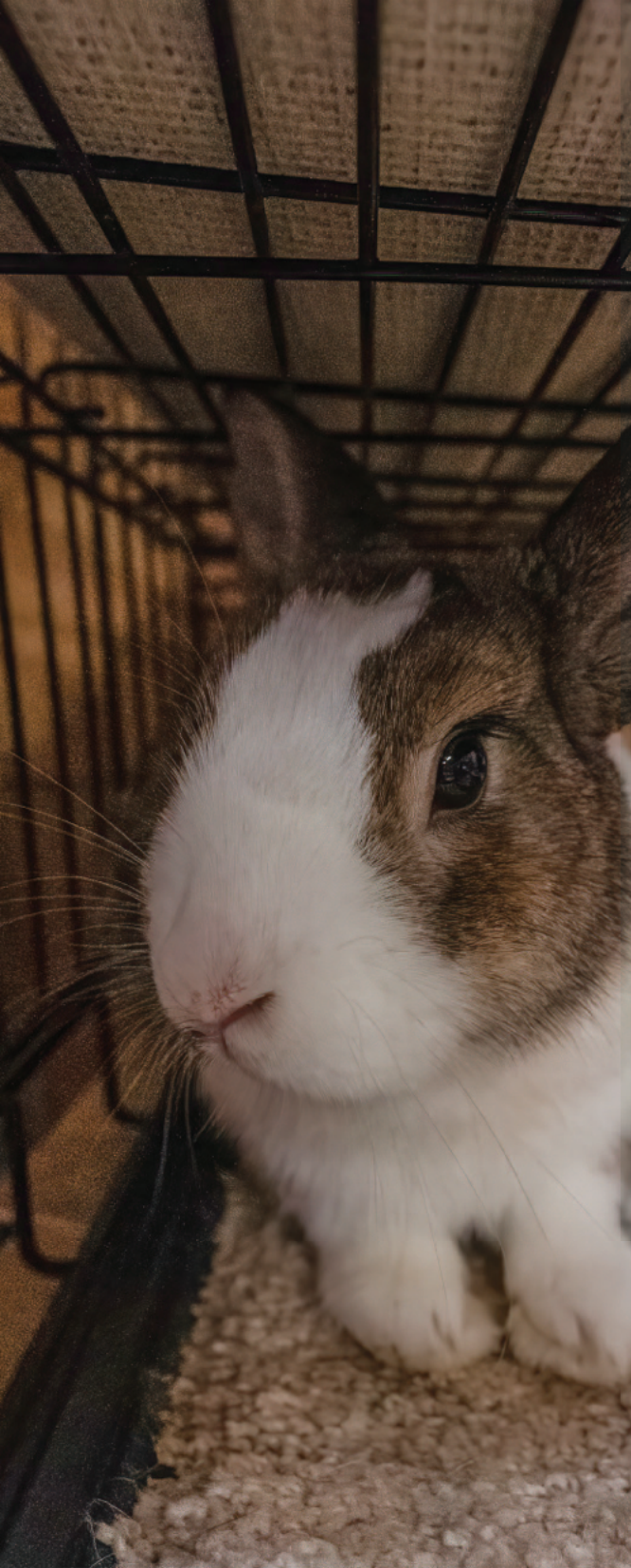
"Hey," he said with genuine kind-

ness. "I really hope that you find your rabbit."

The next day, a police officer arrived to ask questions about Mochi's whereabouts. As I spoke to him, we heard a soft scraping noise coming from inside the wall. The police officer crawled on his stomach and relied on touch to detect a minuscule hole underneath my cabinet, invisible to the eye. He pried open the wooden baseboard, and there was Mochi — stuck inside the hole, a little dehydrated, but otherwise fine.

Mochi was adopted by a loving owner one week later. A year after her adoption, I visited her at her new home, where she greeted me with three little kisses.

Fostering Mochi and Cocoa were some of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had. Gainesville Rabbit Rescue can have up to 110 rabbits at a time, and they rely on fosters to make sure there's room in the shelter. The rescue is constantly



Gainesville Rabbit Rescue saved 13 bunnies, including four brown-and-white Dutch rabbits, after their breeder threatened to kill them if they were not rescued.

at capacity. One rabbit leaves, another comes in. It doesn't help that rabbits, notorious for their breeding, can become pregnant again the day they give birth.

The most common reason rabbits end up at the Bunny Barn is because owners surrender their pet shop bunnies. Two months after Easter, the shelter deals with an influx of rabbits from children who would've been better off with a stuffed toy.

However, many families do take in rabbits as their forever pets — and for good reason. Rabbits are known to thump in the middle of the night to warn their families about burglars or house fires.

“When you have a rabbit, they become family, and families warn each other about danger,” Finelli says.

Cocoa is truly a part of my family. She is there for me during breakups and when my eyes burn from studying for final exams. She was beside me when I drove home from college to quarantine for the pandemic, my stomach tied in knots of anxiety. But most of all, she was there for me when my mom unexpectedly died in April 2022, three weeks before my college graduation.

My mom, who I playfully called Cocoa's grandma, had a special bond with her fluffy grandbaby. Cocoa would leap out from under my bed to greet her and kiss her gently on the nose. My mom learned all of Cocoa's favorite foods and how to clean her litter box. She would take time out of her schedule to play with her throughout the day.

When the grief is overwhelming, I pick Cocoa

Cocoa rests on the author's couch, one of her favorite spots to relax. Guests are often surprised that her bunny does not live in a cage.

up and hold her close to my chest, breathing in the sweet smell of her fur. Her size and weight are just like a newborn baby's. She looks at me with big brown eyes. I think about how although my mom will not meet her grandchildren, I am so glad she got to meet Cocoa.

I look at Cocoa, and I often wonder how something so innocent and pure can exist within a world so cruel and callous. That is why I love rabbits. They are a reminder that life can be composed of wonderful things; that there will always be a reason to keep going despite the pain. When I open the door, Cocoa springs into the air with excitement just to see me.

My mom showed me what it meant to be loved unconditionally. So does Cocoa. I am grateful to Gainesville Rabbit Rescue for saving my best friend. I am grateful for the joy my beautiful rabbit has brought into my life. From an overcrowded backyard, to a castle fit for a queen. 🐰





# Wine Windows of Florence: Overcoming Two Plagues



Babae's wine window gained recognition during a segment of Stanley Tucci's travel show "Searching for Italy."

By Uma Raja

Within the winding corridors of Florence, fragments of history are embedded in the walls. Some appear as lonely wood panels coated in graffiti, while others welcome smiling customers. The wine windows of Florence offer a glance into the struggles of Italy's past—struggles that became relevant during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. The wine windows also offer a unique experience for tourists and locals, turning the mundane interaction of a server delivering a beverage into a charming dining experience.



## Modern Wine Windows

A wine window appears as a one or two foot tall stone archway in the middle of a wall. A small door in the center resembles the entrance of a storybook fairy's home. While most doors remain plain, others are carefully adorned with religious iconography or a still life painting. Curious hands gently open the door and peer into a bustling restaurant or a quaint kitchen. A waiter is spoken to, coins clink and crumpled money is exchanged. A hand emerges with the item of choice—sparkling wine, an Aperol spritz, and at some restaurants, gelato or warm pastries.



Customers ring a bell to attract the attention of a bartender at Babae.

The city of Florence features over 100 wine windows. An official count has never been completed. The windows can be found scattered throughout Florence, be it steps from the Duomo or in the outskirts that circle the perimeter of the city. It is not uncommon to spot three different wine windows while wandering onto a random street. A trained eye would be surprised by how often unsuspecting tourists walk by these unique pieces of

Florence history. As the flow of time pushes business in and out, most windows have been closed and abandoned, offering no use to shoe stores or study centers.

However, restaurants with open windows have capitalized on the opportunity to delight tourists in a simple and cost-effective way. A prime example is the restaurant Vivoli, known for its delicious gelato and for the large crowds that gather around its wine window. After the 1966 flood of Florence, Vivoli discovered a hidden wine window and had it cleaned and restored.



Vivoli was founded in 1929, but the wine window was not discovered until flood water washed away the stucco.

"I love that door because it's different from the typical relationship between customer and owner," said Valentina Gagicomi, a waitress who has worked at Vivoli for ten years. "We don't charge an extra price for the door, it's fun for us."

## A History of Plagues and Taxes

Wine windows served as a form of social distancing during outbreaks of the bubonic plague in northern Italy from 1629 to 1631. Over 9,000 people died in Florence, encompassing 12 percent of the population. Wine windows removed direct contact between customers and shopkeepers, allowing businesses to stay afloat during the economic hardship of the plague.

“Back in those days, people would knock on the door with the coins. The owner can hear the sound, recognize it was the coin, and then he could open a door and sell his glass of wine,” said Florence tour guide Dimentri Fanetti.

While the association with the plague is the most notable history of the wine windows, they were originally commissioned by noble families to reduce taxes. When Cosimo de' Medici became the Grand Duke of Tuscany in the 1500s, he passed a state law to please noble families by allowing them to sell flasks of wine directly from their house, cutting out the middleman for distribution. Nobles did not want strangers entering their homes, so they invented the *buchette del vino*, the “little wine doors.”

“Most of the wealthy families in Florence owned wineries outside of the city center, not far from the Chianti region. They used to sell their wine in the street,” Fanetti said.

## The Plague of 2020

While some businesses displayed wine windows as historical decorations, only the restaurant Babae served customers out of an operational wine window in 2019.

However, the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 gave the windows a new life, harkening Florence back to the days of the plague almost 400 years ago. Italy experienced 25,842,595 cumulative cases of coronavirus and 190,242 deaths.

“People who died were cremated and never seen again by their families,” said University of Florence student Daniele Rossi. “My friend lost his grandmother, I will never forget when the ambulance took her to the hospital. I saw the situation out of my window.”

Vivoli closed on March 8 of 2020. After a strict two-month lockdown of the country, Gaglicomi and other Vivoli staff members were able to return to work. Florence faced another series of lockdowns during November.

According to Rossi, police and military officials would regularly check people for permits to be outside from March to June. Italians were not allowed to leave municipalities unless strictly necessary.

“I could only go out to throw the garbage and do shopping to buy bread, butter and pasta,” Rossi said.

Vivoli opened the wine window in April of 2020, with fourth-generation owner Giulia Vivoli selling takeaway food and wine through the slit. As Florence relies on tourism for its economy, business owners struggled to keep their livelihoods afloat during the series of intense lockdowns.

In March 2021, Italy began to loosen coronavirus restrictions. The wine windows slowly shifted from a safety precaution to a lighthearted tourist attraction.



Wine windows can be found throughout Tuscany in cities such as Pisa. However, Florence remains iconic for its vast number of wine windows.

Florence's wine windows connect citizens to the hardships the city has overcome. Residents do not have to imagine the terror people felt in the 1600s, grabbing provisions through a small window and praying that their loved ones remain healthy. The wine windows are a reminder of those who came before us, a story carved into the walls of a historic city. Be it 1629 or 2020, the windows serve as a symbol of adaptation and resilience.

## **Rave Fashion at Okeechobee Music Festival**

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<https://www.strikemagazines.com/blog-2-1/rave-fashion-at-okeechobee-music-festival>

The EDM community is not known for modesty.

Nipple pasties, face crystals, kaleidoscope glasses, kandi bracelets and pashminas in every color – wear anything you desire, or, wear almost nothing at all.

For outsiders, rave culture can appear bizarre. However, music festival fashion offers complete self-acceptance, the rare freedom to express yourself in an environment free of judgement. Ravers often wear accessories that represent friends or family, and the values of spirituality and PLUR (peace, love, unity and respect) underscore the entire community.

My first rave was the Okeechobee Music and Arts Festival in 2020, and I’ve never fallen in love with a scene more intensely. I wandered through a wonderland of colored lights and energetic music, and I found kinship with people who truly understood me. Styling rave outfits quickly became my favorite hobby, and I would count down the days until I could debut my newest costume. At my third Okeechobee in March 2023, I decided to highlight the creativity behind rave fashion and feature the eclectic individuals who define the festival scene.

### **Rawb “Laser” Lane**



A man hunches over with a golf club in hand, eyebrows furrowed, carefully aligning his aim. With a gentle stroke, the ball rolls into its target – the open mouth of a raver lying on the ground.

“Who’s next?” the golfer asks, bells jingling merrily from his necklace.

A flower crown of roses loops around his maroon fedora. He dons a red pearl snap shirt, a leather vest, argyle shorts, different colored shoes and Ritz cracker socks.

“I’m an entertainer, a traveler. Thinker, doer. I’m a rave professional,” Rawb “Laser” Lane said.

Lane is a 38-year-old from Irving, Texas. He’s been attending raves for a decade.

Lane said, “We’re going a little Western. We’re going a little red and black. We’re going a little circus. I’ve got a nice argyle short going on, red and white, we love argyle. It’s clown.”

Lane’s outfit consists entirely of thrift store finds. He wears a hand cymbal that slips onto a finger. The bells on his necklace were handed down from a close friend who shared his passion for percussion.

“I’ve had them for a very long time. Very proud to keep rocking them,” Lane said. “I always keep some bells on me. Me and my lady always wear bells. We can hear each other coming.”

Lane’s necklace is comprised of old bottle tabs. Some people refer to the style as beer tabs or bottle chains, but Lane dubs them cheap chains.

“I make these for myself. Upcycling. There’s this thing that happens at Burning Man, and at a lot of cool nature fests, or any kind of recycling camps. You take the beer tab bottles and put them together. Sustainable and lightweight,” Lane said.

For Lane, rave fashion is represented by comfort, color and comfortability.

“I only would be where I’m at right now because of what I learned at music festivals,” Lane said. “They bring people together, and put people in the right place for the right reason. And there’s a lot of magic able to be made in that circumstance.”

## Dejhanay Walker



A lacy top flecked with gold, a bright orange skirt and a silver bracelet full of jewels that snakes around her right arm. Her outfit is beautiful, but so is the open and vibrant energy of Dejhanay Walker, a 22-year-old from Indiana.

“I was inspired by a genie, then I came up with this flowy skirt thing to go with this lacy brown top and it honestly paired perfectly,” Walker said.

Her skirt was found at a boutique thrift store. Her bracelet was given to her by a stranger at the music festival, embodying the loving spirit of the rave community.

“The bracelet was gifted to me not even an hour ago,” Walker said. “Some random lady. She was like, ‘this would go so well with your outfit’ and I was like, ‘oh my gosh, thank you.’”

It is not uncommon to receive small gifts from strangers at raves, including everything from finger puppets to crystals.

“My favorite thing about raves is the vibrations, the good vibes,” Walker said.

Okeechobee was Walker’s first time experiencing a music festival.

“Rave fashion means naked to me, because I’m a rave baby. To me, it’s giving naked all the time,” Walker said. “It’s so freeing and beautiful. I love it here.”

Walker encourages those interested in rave fashion to simply take the plunge and experiment with their personal style.

“Just be freaking free with your fashion,” Walker said. “Play with it.”

## Aaron Stepp



The jackal-shaped mask glistens in the Florida sunlight. Aaron Stepp, a 35-year-old from Pittsburgh, smiles broadly as he leans on his bicycle.

“I got a little design off the internet to make a 3D mask model, it’s paper mache. I put a bunch of streamers and pipe cleaners and jewels on it. It actually lights up too,” Stepp said.

The mask is a product of 20 hours of meticulous design. He felt inspired by Anubis, the Egyptian deity of cemeteries, embalming and the protector of graves. Stepp speaks of exploring past lives and spiritual ties to Egypt.

“I have a bit of connection with the history,” Stepp said. “I’ve found a few connections in my life that have resonated lately.”



Aside from his mask, Stepp wears a silver necklace with turquoise pendants, flowy pants and a tie-dyed shawl. He usually has a hand-sewn cape, but the brutal 90 degree weather made wearing it difficult.

“I inherited my necklace and my pants from my aunt. I like to channel her energy sometimes. She’s passed away, but she was a very inspiring and lively young woman,” Stepp said.

Stepp discovered his love for raving five years ago at Okeechobee. He lived in Florida for ten years, so he considers the festival to be a second home.

“Rave fashion is the epitome of self-expression through and through, whatever you want to put on your body and express yourself with,” Stepp said. “Even if that’s wearing nothing. Everything to nothing.”

### **Catherine Lallier**



Her hat is straight out of a psychedelic trip. Complemented by mandala-like earrings, “Grateful Dead” tattoos and pink, heart-shaped sunglasses, Catherine Lallier, a 29-year-old from Miami, incorporates originality into both her outfits and her artwork.

“The hat is definitely the best part. I found it at a little hippie dippy incense shop, where they've got prayer flags and tie dye. I was particularly drawn to it, I've never seen one like that before,” Lallier said.

Lallier found the hat in the South Beach area of Miami, surprised to find a spiritual store nestled among the typical bars and souvenir shops.

Her other accessories are a scrapbook of the people who care for her. Her bag and chunky black Buffalo shoes are birthday and Christmas gifts. Her sunglasses are from a bachelorette party.

“I love seeing everybody's outfits be inspired by the self-expression of being as goofy as you can be, wearing outfits that you probably wouldn't be bold enough to wear out to a grocery shop,” Lallier said.

While Okeechobee is primarily associated with music, it is also an arts festival. When I spotted Lallier and her iconic hat near some murals, I assumed she was just another attendee admiring the artwork. However, Lallier and her partner are some of the artists who bring the paintings to life.

“It's just a different form of artistry,” Lallier said. “My partner has been dying to paint these goldfish and I was like, ‘you know what babe? We can rock it. You want the goldfish? We can do 'em for Okee.’ I painted all the flowers and helped with the design concept mostly, just deeply inspired by these goldfish. I had to support my man's vision.”

Lallier has been attending raves for over a decade and has no plans to stop anytime soon.

“I like that I have the art as like an anchor as what I could give back, but it's really about the people and the community you don't get to see all the time,” Lallier said. “You come back year after year, you see the same friends again and again.”



umaraja · May 18

# Murano Glass: An Intricate and Historic Art Form



Tourists watch a glass blowing master sculpt a flower and a horse for €5 at the Original Murano Glass Furnace & Showroom.

By Uma Raja

The island of Murano exudes the tranquility of a small Italian town. Colorful buildings stretch endlessly into the horizon, lining each side of a canal. Boats bob gently in the sea breeze while vegetable gardens nestle behind storefronts. Children blow bubbles and well-trained dogs bask in the sun.



The island of Murano is one mile north of Venice and has a population of 5,000 residents.

The island features a rich history interwoven with the art of Venetian glass blowing. For 700 years, Venice has been the prime manufacturer of beautiful glass pieces. The creation of glass art was centered on Murano to prevent the city of Venice from burning down. Today, the island offers glass blowing demonstrations, a glass museum and shops featuring a variety of purchasable artwork.

### **Glass Blowing Demonstration**

Transportation from Venice to Murano is not a bus, but instead a large boat. The public water taxi provides easy access for both tourists and locals. Depending on the location in Venice, a ride to the island of Murano can take anywhere between fifteen and forty-five minutes.

Just two minutes from the Murano Faro water taxi stop, guests walk past a lighthouse and arrive at grandiose showrooms of shimmering glass. [The Original Murano Glass Furnace & Showroom](#) has everything from

chandeliers to minuscule figurines of French bulldogs. For thirty minutes, guests can watch a demonstration of a glass master at work.

The glass master sticks a hollow pole into a kiln that glows as hot and orange as the maw of a dragon. A bulbous, balloon-like amount of glass congeals at the end of the tool. The glass master spins, sculpts and strokes with specialized tools. It takes twenty years to become a glass blowing master. Due to the rigorous training, only ten percent of artists achieve the official title.



Modern day glass kilns have heat retainers and equipment to control temperature and the rate of fuel combustion.

The glass begins to resemble a wide cup. It can be molded into various shapes as it is reduced from 2,552 degrees Fahrenheit to 2,012 degrees. The artist pinches with large pliers and exhales into the end of the pole, expanding the glass into a blooming hibiscus flower. He perches a sheet of paper on top of the blistering hot art and it bursts into spontaneous flames. At 932 degrees, the malleable glass cools into a permanent shape.

The flower is only the beginning. The glass master twists and pinches a new cylinder of molten glass. Each movement is calculated and precise. A twitch of the wrist, a subtle flick of the pliers. Each touch is a detail--a muscular leg and a mane flowing in the wind. It is a form of alchemy how the artist conjures a horse in a matter of

minutes, an enchanted figurine lifelike in how it rears on two legs. The front row of the demonstration is reserved exclusively for children. The magic reflects in their wide eyes.



Glass can become too dense or too liquid to sculpt at incorrect temperatures. The piece must be cooled slowly to prevent cracking.

Lost in the moment, audiences find themselves transported back into the showrooms. The glass blowing demonstration fosters newfound appreciation for the intricate details in each figurine.

## Glass Museum

The Glass Museum walks guests through the chronological history of glass as an art form. Venetians were inspired by glasswork from the Middle East, particularly from Syria. By the 14th century, Venice had become the undisputed master of glass with 12 active glasswork facilities. Venetian glass gained notoriety due largely to Angelo Barovier inventing clear glass. Venetian glass was in high demand with even the pope commissioning pieces. The museum was founded in 1861 to map out the history and life of Murano after the island began to recover from the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797.

"Murano glass is exported to many parts of the world. It's important for the history of the island. New and ancient, we have it on display," said Glass Museum docent Laura Bianchi.

Murano glass evolved with time, from basic bottles to goblets interlaced with delicate pink and blue flowers. In the nineteenth century, artists began experimenting with innovative techniques, ushering in an era of contemporary glass. A room full of glass tomatoes, unicorns and cacti display newfound creative freedom.



It's not just the glass pieces that are a work of art, but the museum itself. The Flamboyant Gothic building dates back to 1689 where it served as a patrician's palace. On the ceiling, painted angels flutter through fluffy clouds.



Triumph of San Lorenzo by Francesco Zugno is displayed on the ceiling of the Glass Museum's largest exhibit room.

The Glass Museum is worth visiting to gain a nuanced appreciation for art history. The museum is brimming with details in both English and Italian about glass making tools and techniques in various centuries.

## Shopping

A stroll through the shops of Murano is sure to provide a lovely day of entertainment for those visiting Venice. Shoppers rejoice, as Murano is a haven for those who love retail therapy.

"My favorite part of Murano is the details on some of the small glass work, it's just crazy," said Minnesota tourist Brandon Schons. "I got a glass gondola with Venice in the background and little glass candies for a fake candy dish."





Murano is 1,134 acres and is mainly composed of glass figurine shops.

Each store is unique and represents the personalities of various glass blowers. There are glass jellyfish encased in tropical blue, life-size busts of ruby and gold angel wings, an entire menagerie of animals ranging from rabbits to tarantulas and matching dinnerware sets.

The shops provide a perfect sample of Italy for loved ones back home. Adorable magnets, sparkling bracelets and multicolored shot glasses are staples of any Murano storefront. Due to the variety of figurines, souvenirs can be catered with a personal touch.



Selenium mixed with pure gold creates a ruby red coloration in the glass.

"This is a small town, but it's definitely got a lot to offer with all the glass blowing culture. It's a beautiful. Even when it's raining, it still has an effect on you," Schons said.

Murano is worth a day trip for those looking to appreciate a timeless art form. Even 700 years later, the skills of the glass blowers remain a testament to the artistic achievements of humanity. Like the glass itself, the island of Murano offers a refined beauty that cannot be found anywhere else.



Dana Priest (left) and Ukrainian journalist Olga Gresko at the Wilson Center in Washington. (Photo courtesy of Olga Gresko)

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September 28, 2023 • [2023: Las Vegas](#)

## Pulitzer Prize winner Dana Priest flattered to be named SPJ 2023 Fellow of the Society

By [Uma Raja](#)

Dana Priest is an investigative reporter for the Washington Post with a specialization in national security, United States intelligence agencies and military operations. She has won two Pulitzer Prizes for her work.

“I keep gravitating towards the hardest things to write about,” Priest said. “I like to write about national security because it’s not right there on the surface for you to have, it’s something that you have to establish relationships for. You have to figure out how the bureaucracy works. You have to take a lot of time to win people’s trust.”

Priest’s most recent endeavor was the Pegasus Project, centering on military-grade spyware licensed by the Israeli firm NSO Group. It was discovered that the spyware had infected the cell phone of Jamal Khashoggi’s wife. Khashoggi was a dissident journalist murdered and dismembered by the Saudi regime in 2018.

“They were in constant communication and she was a flight attendant. They were obviously trying to follow him through her. The spyware could listen to your phone conversations, look at all your social media, your videos, your deleted photos,” Priest said.

Priest and a team of Washington Post reporters worked in an international consortium with 24 partners from around the world. The project took over a year and a half to complete and received the George Polk Award in technology reporting.

Priest enjoys the challenge of uncovering stories that may not have been told without her research.

“The kidnapping off the streets in Afghanistan of suspected terrorists, interrogating and torturing them in secret prisons that the U.S. had set up, were some of the most rewarding stories I’ve done because they were so hard,” Priest said.

Priest is a Knight Chair in public affairs journalism and a professor at the University of Maryland. She founded Press Uncuffed in 2014, a program where each of her students is assigned a journalist imprisoned overseas.

“Students figure out how to do an in-depth profile of their journalist, including the bilateral relations with the U.S. and that country, what the State Department has or has not done, what the human rights record is and what embassies overseas do,” Priest said.

By selling bracelets with the names of nine incarcerated journalists, the program raised \$40,000 for the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Priest has taught classes on investigative reporting, imprisoned journalists and the rise of global disinformation and censorship since the 2000’s. A board member of the Fauquier Times in Warrenton, VA, Priest will begin teaching a course on the importance of local journalism next semester.

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