

# Hill: ArtPool is a key part of district

By Judy Hill | Guest Columnist St. Petersburg Tribune

Published: March 2, 2014

The March issue of Southern Living magazine anointed St. Petersburg's Grand Central District as a "Next Great Neighborhood." The feature shows a small map of Central Avenue between 20th and 25th streets and highlights eight of the funky, kitschy, trendy establishments that bring color, culture and camp to part of Central that until recently was drab and unremarkable.

Well, except for Haslam's Book Store, a mecca for book-lovers from around West Central Florida, which is one of the featured eight.

This isn't in a front-page story. It's in a feature buried inside the magazine.

This is not in the same category as St. Petersburg being named to The New York Times 2014 Travel List that included only nine U.S. cities.



It is still fabulous that Southern Living tapped the area with its magic wand and said this place is special.

In addition to Haslam's, the other notables on the list include the Queens Head gastropub; Central Oddities, a mix of retro and mid-century furniture and tchotchkes; Beak's St. Pete, an eating establishment decorated in gauche early Florida; Twigs & Leaves, an all-native plant nursery; Roco Traders, featuring jewelry, home goods and furniture from Mexico; and Urban Brew and BBQ, featuring craft brews and hearty food.

Oh, and ArtPool Gallery & Vintage Boutique, which offers arts and crafts, vintage clothing, jewelry and too much other stuff to name, most of it from local artists. Plus, a covered outdoor dining area (dog friendly) and an open-air expanse in the back that, when added to the huge indoor area, offers about 7,500 square feet for all sorts of festivals and fashion shows.

Coming up March 8 is a Mad Hatter's Masquerade Ball. The next monthly Crafty Fest, a market with outside vendors, is March 22 to 23. Visit [www.artpoolgallery.com](http://www.artpoolgallery.com) for more information.

I visited ArtPool because it seems to encompass about everything quirky and fun the Grand Central District has to offer.

Marina Williams is its doyenne. A freelance photographer who graduated from St. Petersburg's Lakewood High and New College in Sarasota, Williams says that after a stint at the University of East London, the grind of trying to make a living blending her interests and talents led to ArtPool, which was originally in a small gallery downtown.

The business quickly outgrew its space. So ArtPool moved into the Grand Central District in 2011.

No doubt, if 2030 Central Avenue were a sentient being it would love its current role in the revitalization of Central Avenue, which includes wide walkable sidewalks and plenty of on-street parking.

Once ArtPool moved into larger digs, Marina said her mother suggested bringing in a rack of clothes.

One rack led to another and another.

"The artistic crowd likes the vintage and unusual stuff," she said.



Bear in mind, she's one of those in the artistic crowd. On that day she had on striped pants and a patterned top.

Or maybe it was the other way around. I was in sensory overload, so it's hard to remember.

What I do remember thinking was that most of us who aren't 30 and arty and skinny and a little bit like Zooey Deschanel of TV's "New Girl" would look absolutely ridiculous in similar threads.

But she looked fabulous.

Marina may be a wonder woman, but she doesn't do it alone. She is ably assisted by her mother, Becky Williams, and her longtime significant other, Evan Williams.

It is coincidence that Evan and Marina share a last name.

Anyway, Becky trolls for stuff to sell and often staffs the shop/gallery/cafe. Evan serves the beer and wine and is also the chief cook and bottle washer. On the day I was there, the BLT sandwiches he was serving looked to die for.

I was actually looking for a couple of specific things when I stopped in. But there is so much fascinating, interesting stuff that my abulia kicked in.

That, by the way, is the inability to make a decision, in my case particularly when faced with too many choices.

So I left empty handed.

But I vow I'll go back.