



## Just bead it! Mardi Gras mural brings parade to life in downtown Mobile building



Emen Levy, an artist who lived in New Orleans for 18 years and was one of the first to use Mardi Gras beads to create fine art, was commissioned to create a 6-by-10-foot mural in the lobby of the RSA BankTrust building in downtown Mobile. (Courtesy Emen Levy)

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MOBILE, Alabama -- When Emen Levy was first approached about creating a Mardi Gras mural in the lobby of the RSA Trustmark building four years ago, he was immediately intrigued.

Levy, an artist who lived in New Orleans for 18 years until Hurricane Katrina hit and “uprooted” him, made a name for himself there by creating mosaics from Mardi Gras beads. He wasn’t familiar with Mardi Gras in Mobile, he said, but when he received the commission from Retirement Systems of Alabama, he also received an education.

The mural “represents the fact that Mobile had the first Mardi Gras in the United States,” he said. “Most people don’t know that.”

Now living in Baltimore, Levy said that RSA officials found him online and told him they were interested in having him create a wall-sized mural. “They described what they wanted and asked how much it would cost and how long it would take,” he said. “I said I’d have to move to Mobile for a year or so,” he added, laughing. Since that wasn’t possible, he said he would do it on panels.

After hearing nothing for two years, one day Levy received a phone call out of the blue asking if he was still interested in the project. “They shared a photo of the room they were putting it in, the raw space, and that got me excited,” he said. “It looked like it was going to be an important piece.”

After he drew a plan and it was approved, he worked on the project over the course of two years, creating it in three panels that are six feet tall and three-and-a-half-feet wide. Last fall, he drove the panels to Mobile to oversee the installation.

“I’m super pleased with the space,” he said. “It was a lot of work, but I think it was worth it.”

The mural depicts a Mardi Gras float with the Mobile skyline in the background. “A few times, I laughed out loud while doing it,” Levy said.

He added lots of details, such as a Moon Pie in the sky and a bottle of rum in the bottom corner. But his favorite part is that the four float riders wear identical masks, and yet “each face has its own personality,” he said. “The entire design is all original.”

While he was working on the piece, RSA acquired the Van Antwerp building, so Levy had to modify the design to fit it in.

He tries to use beads that have been caught at Mardi Gras parades, he said, but sometimes he has to buy them. He said he can’t even guess how many strands of beads he used in the mural. “It would be easier for a mathematician to count the number of beads in a square foot and figure it out that way,” he joked.

The mural is the largest bead mosaic he’s ever done, he said. “You walk in any of the doors to the building, and it’s the first thing you see. That really knocked me out. It’s the kind of presentation an artist hopes for.”

