

Murals

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studio when the phone rang.

The dioramas had been found by Larry Basik who, along with his family, is developing the Big Cypress Market Place, an 87,000-square-foot flea market located along U.S. 41, four miles east of Collier Boulevard. Basik found out about the dioramas through the Collier County Museum while searching for local art and historical pieces to decorate the market.

"People said we should do Mediterranean, but we wanted to embrace the local culture and history," Basik says.

Vallez was surprised and delighted to receive the phone call.

"He was sitting at the desk with his feet up," Robah says. "We had heard they were still around, but he didn't believe it at first."

Vallez spent nearly two years — two decades ago — working on the 10-by-8-foot mural-like pieces. The paintings are landscapes of the Everglades. Tall as a basketball hoop and wider than a family van, the dioramas look as though you could tip them on their side and they'd sleep four adults side-by-side. They're about 4 feet deep, giving the paintings a 3-D feeling, as though you could literally walk into the sceneries.

They were commissioned by Billy Ray, then owner of Port of the Islands, a cluster of hotel rooms and condos along U.S. 41 East that were notorious drug-



Jerry Vallez, left, and his wife, Robah, center, get a tour of the Naples Big Cypress Market Place from Larry Basik, right, and Keith Basik, second from left. View a photo gallery at naplesnews.com.
Jimmie Presley/Staff

running spots during the 1970s and 80s.

Ray wanted to remold the hotel's image and hired Vallez to produce three dioramas that featured different landscapes and habitats in the Everglades.

Vallez and his family (Robah and their two daughters are professional artists as well) drove 50 miles round-trip each day between Naples and Port of the Isles.

He made molds for the dioramas and made the "canvas" out of a substance called Polycrete.

It's like wall spackle but stronger and flexible.

"I remember a hurricane coming through and we filled them with water to hold them down," Vallez says while waiting outside a storage bay at Big Cypress Market Place. "They looked like big bathtubs."

Vallez is a photographer as well, and still has a leather case filled with pictures he took while building and painting the dioramas.

He was only a few months away from finishing the works when

Ray died. Vallez's project died along with him.

"I heard one was used as a booth at the fair, and they've been in storage since," Vallez says. "Two of them were used in the state fair, but then they were stored in a barn or some type of equipment shed."

The dioramas have finally found a home at Big Cypress Market Place. The Collier County Museum has loaned them to Basik, whose market will house the dioramas in the foreseeable future.

One is of a cypress swamp, with giant cypress trees draped with pink and orange bromeliads (also called air plants) that tower over calm waters below. The second is a classic Everglades image: sawgrass and the open prairie that makes up the famed River of Grass. The third, and least complete, is a coastal scene with mangrove islands, brown pelicans and the Gulf of Mexico.

"That needs a lot of work," Vallez tells the developers of Big Cypress while scrutinizing the decades-old works. "Very little has been finished."

Vallez worked with local taxidermists in the 80s to find stuffed alligators and raccoons. He wanted to put animals at the bottom of the painting, further enhancing the visual depth of the pieces. Some patches of sawgrass and a few fake mangrove limbs would have completed the works.

Vallez told the Basik family that he would help finish the dioramas.

"It's an exciting project," Robah says. "He has ideas to complete them, but we don't know what they'll be. Right now it's kind of like being an archeologist."

Like many artists, Vallez doesn't like the idea of leaving a piece unfinished. But regardless of their future, or if he gets to work on the dioramas again, Vallez is just glad to know they're still around.

"There's some scratches I'll touch up, but beyond that they're in pretty good shape. But it's been fun. It was a big disappointment when I didn't get to finish them. But this has been a pleasant surprise. Kind of a revival."