

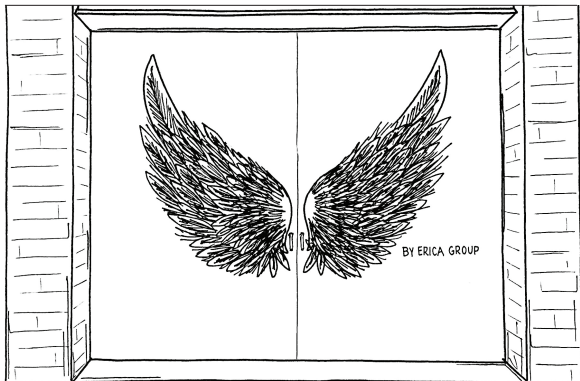
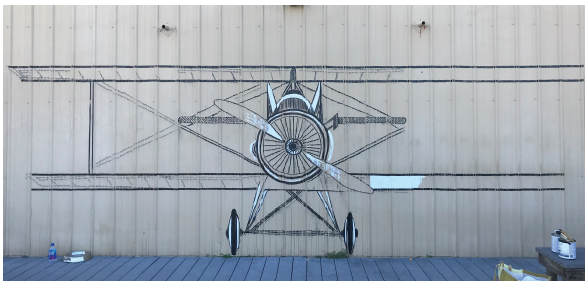
WADING IN: THE STUDIO

FLORIDA ARTIST PROFILES

By Christina Cush

WINGING IT

DELAND NATIVE AND ARTIST ERICA GROUP SPARKED A NATIONAL TREND WITH HER LARGE-SCALE **WING-THEMED SCULPTURES AND MURALS** THAT NOW FORM A WEST VOLUSIA ART TRAIL



Clockwise from top left: The beginning stages of Group's mural of an antique biplane at Skydive Deland; the artist's popularity soared when people started posting images on social media with her wings; Group's pencil sketch of her original design

Erica Group, a sunny 30-year-old, giggles that she can't fit into her favorite painting jeans anymore. The prolific artist is on the brink of having her first baby, and even her comfy old Levi's, spattered like a Jackson Pollock with years of paint, need to adjust to the momentous event.

Her baby's arrival coincides with the completion of a series of promotional videos created as part of her work as artist-in-residence for the West Volusia County

region, where she lives with her husband in Deland.

Group studied architecture at the University of South Florida and interior design at Cazenovia College in central New York. After graduating in 2012, she followed her heart home and started a graphic design business.

"I created logos, did hand-lettering projects, drew architectural portraits and did custom maps for wedding couples to give to out-of-town guests," she recalls.

"I kept getting referrals for new projects thanks to good old word of mouth."

In September 2014, a spontaneous decision occurred during a dress-shop photo shoot that literally put Group's art on the map.

"I very casually drew some white chalk wings on the side of the dress shop I was promoting, thinking it was a cool idea," she says. She assumed they'd wash away in the afternoon, thanks to trusty Florida rain. But they didn't. Instead, the wings

COURTESY ERICA GROUP

stayed, becoming a beautiful backdrop for thousands of Instagram photos tagged #delandwings.

“It went crazy,” says Group. “People came into the dress shop asking, ‘Where are the wings?’”

In December 2014, Group made the wings immortal and covered the fading chalk with enduring paint. Other muralists around the United States, and the world, have created similar wing-themed works, but Group’s large painting in a small town appears to have been one of the first that sparked the global trend. This career turning point resulted in more wedding illustrations and shop signs and launched Group’s new focus as a muralist.

“I tackled a restaurant wall and painted a bike built for two and a banner describing the Friday night farmers market in downtown Deland,” Group says. It’s hard to believe that she doubted herself, as she is so passionate about the charms of quaint Deland. “It’s the cutest.” Next came a gig to paint an enormous wall outside Persimmon Hollow, the local brewery.

This page from top: Group’s Peacock feather mural is one of five wing-themed murals on the West Volusia art trail; Group painting one of her works at her studio.



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West Volusia’s tourism board noticed the personality-packed work Group generated, and they wanted in. In August 2017, Group

became West Volusia’s official artist-in-residence. “It sounds so fancy,” she beams. “They asked me to create five sets of wings and install them in different locations, but never to duplicate the original dress shop wings.”

Group’s public works create a 54-mile art trail across the county with six Instagram-worthy stops, including the original wings painted in Deland; a vintage biplane at Skydive Deland; peacock tail feathers marking a pioneer

settlement in Barberville; fairy wings for the elaborate fairy trail in Cassadaga; scrub jay wings at the Deltona preserve; and swallow-tailed kite wings at the Lake Woodruff National Wildlife refuge.

Some of her public projects, such as the scrub jay, have wingspans upwards of 8 feet, so Group enlisted the help of her dad, a machine fabricator, and husband Jeff Kiel, a wood turner. Despite the baby’s anticipated arrival in late June, Group has hardly slowed down to think about how motherhood might impact her creativity or productivity.

“We have three sets of grandparents nearby, so I will take advantage of their eagerness to be involved,” she says. “I want to be a working mom and I don’t want to stop what I’m doing.”

Visit erica.group for more information. 📍