

## Videos

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**Video:** Khalil M. Habib, a philosopher and professor at Salve Regina University, in Newport, leads a discussion about Islamic political philosophy.



**Video:** Elmwood Little League celebrates its 60th anniversary by inviting the thousands of players who have played on its teams.

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A4

Sunday, April 17, 2011

The Providence Sunday Journal

## NEWS PREVIEW

### Politics

401-277-8067

The Providence Democratic City Committee is looking to hire an executive director, in Monday's Journal.

### Justice

401-277-7821

Lawyer Robert Ciresi goes on trial on extortion and bribery charges in the North Providence municipal corruption case, in this week's Journal.

### Business

401-277-7030

An entrepreneurial couple tell why they relocated to Providence to start a business, in this week's Journal.

## ENVIRONMENT

# Making art of the threat below

Sculpture brings environmental danger to surface for all to see

By GINA MACRIS  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

### PROVIDENCE

When Courtney Mattison first became interested in marine biology in high school in her native California, she realized that choosing sea creatures as a subject for sculpture in her ceramics classes allowed her to pay greater attention to their anatomies.

"I'm a visual learner," Mattison explained.

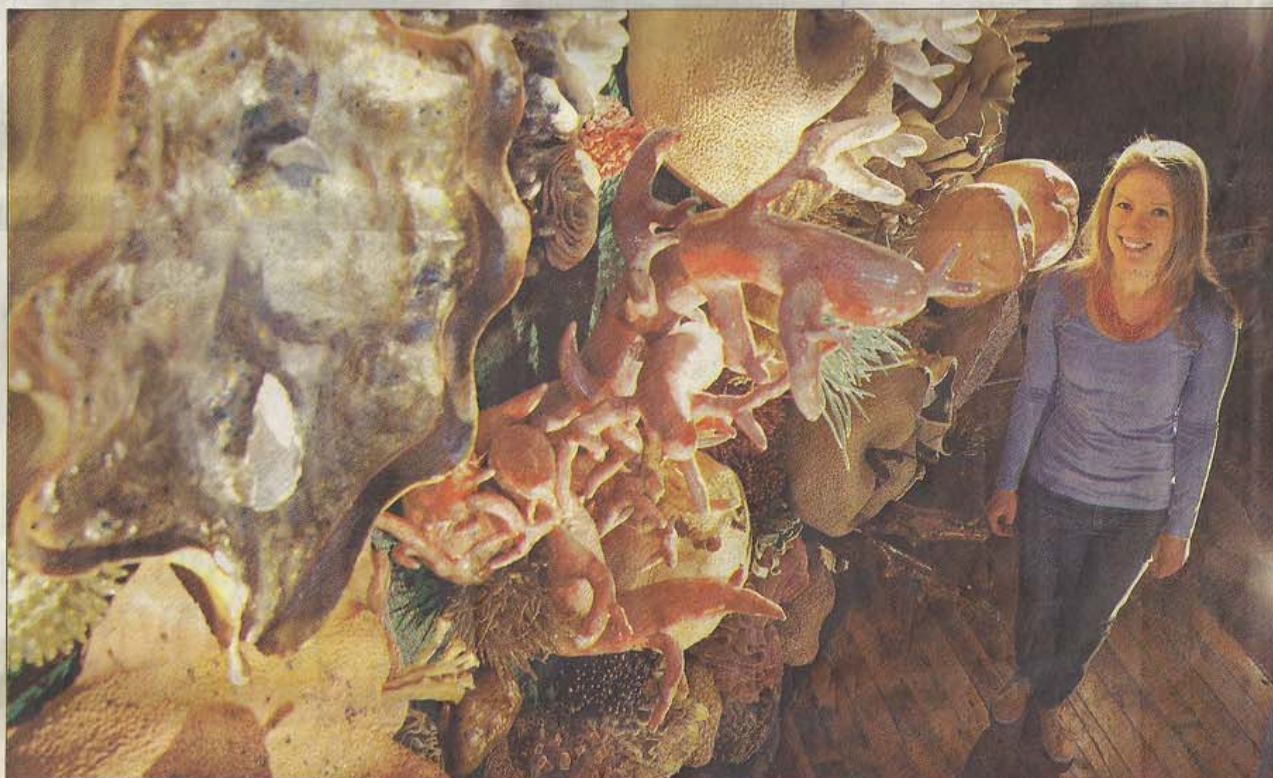
Fast-forward a decade to Brown University, where Mattison is a master's degree candidate in environmental studies, with a focus on the coral reef, endangered by pollution, overfishing and climate change.

She has used advanced skills in ceramic sculpture to bring the impact of the coral reef's struggle out of the water and into the public eye in the hope that more people will care about a phenomenon that for many is out of sight and out of mind.

Mattison is in Washington, D.C., where she has just put the finishing touches on a ceramic installation 10 feet wide and nearly 15 feet high in the lobby of the U.S. Commerce Building, headquarters of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Countless individual ceramic sculptures, shaped and colored with a high degree of realism, make up the installation, the culmination of a year's work.

The bottom left corner of the installation depicts a



BROWN UNIVERSITY / MIKE COHEA

**Courtney Mattison**, a Brown University graduate student, with the coral reef she created with ceramic pieces to illustrate its struggle to survive against environmental threats. The art work is on display at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration headquarters in Washington, D.C.

vibrant, colorful, and complex ecosystem, with anemones and a variety of coral species. The ecological diversity fades into a bleached mid-section — the result of warming water temperatures.

Finally, the structure is overtaken by algae, which smother the coral.

It becomes a "green, hairy, nasty rubble pile," Mattison said.

"I focused on translating the main ideas into simple messages that people see and understand," she said.

And in the upper right

corner of the installation there is a glimmer of hope, a red branching coral growing out of the slime to symbolize recovery, Mattison said.

As part of her master's project, titled "Our Changing Seas: A Coral Reef Story," Mattison interviewed dozens of scientists about the main environmental issues affecting the health of coral reefs as well as artists who talked about the way the arts can communicate the urgency of the need for policy changes on an emotional level.

These interviews are distilled into quotes for visitors

to read on two iPads on display along with the installation.

"Courtney's work is extraordinary, combining a vital ecological issue with gorgeous artistry," said Timmons Roberts, director of Brown's Center for Environmental Studies, who helped advise Mattison's project.

"What a joy to see this project come to life," he said.

Mattison worked with Heather Leslie, professor of environmental studies and biology at Brown, and Linda Sorin, head of the ceramics department at RISD.

Mattison is a 2008 graduate of Skidmore College with a major in marine biology and ceramic sculpture. For her master's thesis, she said, she wanted a memorable impact on as many people as possible, not write yet another report that would "make people's eyes glaze over."

Leslie, her principal adviser at Brown, helped her make the needed contacts at NOAA that made the installation possible.

She began sculpting in March 2010, in a rented studio, and drove the pieces

in small batches to RISD for firing, Mattison said. Mattison also has taken three advanced ceramics courses at RISD in her two years at Brown.

After she receives her degree, Mattison says she hopes to get into public policy work for a nonprofit organization and maintain a studio.

The art is "definitely important," she said. "I try to get a good understanding of the science and then try to translate it."

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