

For Immediate Release
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NEA funds partnership with Sparks Collaborative Ensemble, Creative Clay and USF College of Marine Science

Thanks to a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts through Creative Pinellas, playwright and audio producer [Sheila Cowley](#) is collaborating with the neurodiverse and physically challenged artists of [Creative Clay](#) and St. Pete's internationally-acclaimed USF College of Marine Science (CMS).

The year-long project invites artists and scientists to work together to create online arts that make the Pinellas coastline accessible to residents and visitors with transportation and mobility challenges, Spanish-speaking families, our visually impaired, hearing impaired and Deaf communities, and those whose busy schedules make attending live arts events difficult.

Cowley's project welcomes scientists as creators and research materials as both inspiration and art supplies – and gives Creative Clay's artists the opportunity to work inclusively with scientists and professional film, literary and performing artists.

Working together gives scientists and artists “the opportunity to break down traditional silos and collaborate to share marine science research projects with Pinellas residents whose lives are intricately linked to the health of our oceans,” says Distinguished University Professor of Biological Oceanography [Dr. Mya Breitbart](#), whose [Breitbart Lab](#) researchers are key members of the project team.

Sparks Collaborative Ensemble

Cowley leads the [Sparks Collaborative Ensemble](#), a working group of actors, dancers, visual artists and musicians diverse in age, ethnicity, gender identity, ability and artform. Since 2016, their work has been presented at Creative Clay, The Studio@620, the MFA, Tampa Museum of Art, USFSP, Creative Pinellas, Dunedin International Film Festival, Sunscreen Film Fest and online.

Since 2023 Cowley's written and produced more than a dozen free illustrated audiobooks for kids in English and in Spanish – many with Creative Clay and the latest with Breitbart and CMS researchers. [on YouTube @SparksCollaborativeEnsemble](#)

Creative Clay

Creative Clay is a vibrant arts studio and gallery in St. Pete's Grand Central District, where neurodiverse and physically challenged artists thrive. “Since 2019, Creative Clay has partnered with Sparks on 13 different successful projects connecting artists with

disabilities to the broader community through a wide range of performances, visual arts, and more,” says Kim Dohrman, CEO of Creative Clay.

Many artists who were part of that first 2019 Sparks performance – for 200 people who joined a parade led by Creative Clay into a Museum of Fine Arts exhibit of their work – “found their passion in performance and a new avenue of expression opened for them.”

Arts and Science

In January 2020 and 2024, the College of Marine Science and USFSP STEM Club hosted Art & Science Night, inviting artists into their labs to hear about their work and create art inspired by their research. Cowley created performances for both events.

For this project, she’ll be bringing Creative Clay’s member artists – adults with neurodifferences and physical disabilities ranging in age from 18-72 – to the College of Marine Science labs, and bringing USF marine researchers to Creative Clay.

The project includes **visual arts** to decorate the CMS facility, an **online children’s story** – and **two filmed performances** choreographed by Helen Hansen French and Fernando Chonqui, inspired by the movement of Pinellas coastal waters and marine life.

Bilingual performances will be filmed at USFSP with **ASL interpreting**, set to sound compositions based on CMS research data, and the words of Creative Clay’s artists as they share these experiences with poet Sara Ries Dziekonski. Performance videos will be available with **audio description** and **captions**. Details at sdcowley.com/artists-and-scientists-creating.

Selections from the first performance will be shared at Creative Clay’s [Spring for the Arts](#) fundraiser on April 19.

This project produced with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, Creative Pinellas, the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners and the State of Florida.

sdcowley.com/collaborations
[YouTube @SparksCollaborativeEnsemble](#)

Creative Clay creativeclay.org

USF College of Marine Science usf.edu/marine-science
Breitbart Lab marine.usf.edu/genomics

Beyond Placemaking NEA grant creativepinellas.org/opportunity/beyond-placemaking