

School's Mosaic Project Makes a Splash



The Montessori Arts and Sciences School mosaic mural spans 88 feet on a cinder block wall.

Nature abhors a vacuum. As anyone who has seen graffiti spread like mildew over any available surface can attest, a cinder block wall is a blank canvas just begging for adornment. And the Montessori Arts and Sciences School in Carlsbad had three of them.

The school, located just east of I-5 off Carlsbad Village Drive, resides in the house that belonged to former Carlsbad Mayor David Dunne. The Mission Revival-style structure from the 1930s was adapted as the school's main building, and the decor and landscaping give it the feel of a home, with a playground and sports field tucked behind.

But there was the matter of those walls. Required as sound-proofing by building codes, they were gray and industrial. Janann Taylor, director of the school, longed to transform them into something beautiful. Inspired by Niki de Saint Phalle, Antoni Gaudi and memorial walls around the world, Taylor envisioned a mosaic mural that would connect students with the past and inspire them for the future.

In 2006, a series of fortuitous discussions with the Carlsbad Arts Education office and ArtSplash Chairperson Joni Miringoff helped the school begin to turn the idea into reality. Taylor, with help from Art Director Denise Buccola, mined local resources to put together a mosaic mural that now spans the 88-foot length of the center wall.

The project, titled "Tribute to What Came Before Us," began with a segment depicting coastal sage scrub habitat, and in subsequent years has expanded with segments titled "Tribute to the Wetlands," "Tribute to the Luiseño" and the current year's segment, "Prehistoric Plants and Animals," on the south wall. The school has plans to complete the mural with an ocean segment and other themes.

Students are very much involved in the design, taking field trips

The mural features different segments spotlighting Carlsbad's history and natural landscape.



Photo: Sam Wells

to learn about local habitats and history, including a trip to the San Diego Museum of Natural History to learn about the fossil record of the area. "Children are naturally curious about animals and the natural world," says Taylor, and incorporating those elements into their curriculum engages their curiosity. Students do grade-appropriate illustrations on their research, and Buccola creates an artist's rendition of the mural segment based on the student topics.

Local artists contribute ceramic pieces for some of the larger design elements, and students create smaller elements such as California poppies, fish and plants. Parents also donate time and resources. Some of the assembly comes during ArtSplash every fall when several 5-foot-by-3-foot panels from each segment are set up at the two-day community arts festival. Participants help fill in the surrounding areas with mosaic tiles made from recycled bottles and donated multicolored clay tile remnants.

Having ArtSplash's support for the project was critical to getting it off the ground, says Taylor. The valuable contacts and community involvement have brought the ambitious mural design within reach. "We're a nonprofit helping another nonprofit, so it was perfect," says Miringoff. "We make art fun for the community, and people in the community get a chance to try their hand at something new." Also crucial was grant money given to the school from Carlsbad Arts Education.

Taylor feels strongly that the mural is about more than the immediate community of the school. "It's greater than ourselves," she says. "It's a way to give back, to try to be a part of history and have a positive impact with respect to the environment and quality of life." •

The school welcomes community involvement, both in assembling the mosaic and by offering the field as a venue for community events. If you are interested in collaborating with the school in community arts education, contact Director Janann Taylor at montessoriarts-scs@sbcglobal.net, 760.434.6440, or visit www.montessoriartsandsciencesschool.com.