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ART STRETCHING BOUNDARIES



David Crane/Staff Photographer

Valley View Community School Principal Gail Abril looks at a small copy of the mural that students in the special needs program are creating to decorate a wall at the school.

Mural offers kids a chance to share

BY CONNIE LLANOS
Staff Writer

NEWHALL — Krista Evans' long brown braids swished as she gently glided her purple-doused paintbrush across the 8-foot-high canvas.

"Purple is my favorite color," said 7-year-old Krista, her huge smile revealing a missing front tooth. "This is the first time I ever get to paint a mural."

Spina bifida, a neurological disability, keeps Krista in a brown, wooden wheelchair most of the time, but painting is one of the activities she can do with ease.

Mark Kolodziejczyk, the father of a 15-year-old who suffers from Rett's syndrome, knows all about kids like Krista.

He realized early on that art had a special place in his own daughter's physical therapy.

That motivated him to start the Special Children's Arts Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing mural painting to special needs children as a means of integrating them into their communities.

The newest mural Kolodziejczyk is overseeing is at Valley View Community School in Newhall and will feature images of disabled children participating in extreme sports.

The 8-foot-by-30-foot mural will be on display inside the school's physical therapy room.

A former scenic artist for

PLEASE SEE MURAL / PAGE 2



Above, Valley View Community School preschooler Kevin Fuentes, 3, gets help from teacher's aide Susan Natzke and sixth-grader Katrice Smith. The kids at the school are creating a mural that will hang on the wall of the school. At left, Valley View sixth-grader Crystal Ramirez works on a section of the mural.

David Crane
Staff Photographer



Valley View Community School sixth-grader Alex Anguiano helps Crysta Evans, 7, with her painting. Children at the school are creating a mural that will hang on a wall at the school.

David Crane
Staff Photographer

MURAL: Art project fuels kids' enthusiasm

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theme park rides, including Disneyland's Indiana Jones and Universal Studios' Terminator 2:3-D. Kolodziejczyk left a lucrative art career to chase his passion.

"I cannot explain it, but this is the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my career," Kolodziejczyk said.

Declining art classes in public schools — especially in special education — and a drive to integrate regular education children with special needs children led Kolodziejczyk on a search.

"The whole purpose behind doing these art projects is that it builds community and it helps develop socialization skills between the regular and handicapped students," he said. "It

allows regular students to learn to appreciate who they are."

Now the Santa Clarita resident admits he works more hours than he ever has, but it's worth it.

"Nothing comes even close — bottom line."

Nicole Armitage, an associate of Kolodziejczyk and the artist behind the mural project, said the biggest reward for her is to watch art work its magic on these very special children.

"I have seen how these kids relax when you give them a brush," Armitage said. "They stay very focused and it get's very quiet. It's very Zen-like."

Carol Posthumus, a special education teacher at Valley View, said that for many of her students, who are severely disabled and mostly nonverbal, the mural has been a huge treat.

"One little girl was so excited as soon as we came in here she had her hand ready," Posthumus said.

Having special needs children

work as artists in such a large-scale project is designed to help them build relationships with their able-bodied counterparts.

Posthumus said it's a two-way payoff. "It is wonderful to see the regular education children being so patient."

Sixth-grader Katrice Smith held 4-year-old Zion Thomas' hand steady as they drenched the canvas in black paint.

"It's fun working with the kids," Katrice said. "I like being a part of this and helping."

Tanya Kalantari, a special education coordinator at the school, explained interaction like this helps the special education students.

"This really encourages socialization. Anytime a peer does a typical activity, it motivates them to try it," Kalantari said.

For Zion it's about having fun — and the color purple.

"I like painting purple."

The Special Children's Arts Foundation has been commissioned for two more murals by the city of Santa Clarita, and Kolodziejczyk said he's got a growing waiting list of excited participants.

Still the best part of the day for Kolodziejczyk comes with what he calls his Hitchcock moment — when he touches the finished mural with his daughter.

"For me to touch the mural with my daughter, it's like leaving my signature without signing the mural," Kolodziejczyk said.

The credit, he said, goes to his daughter.

"She is the one who motivated me."

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