

The



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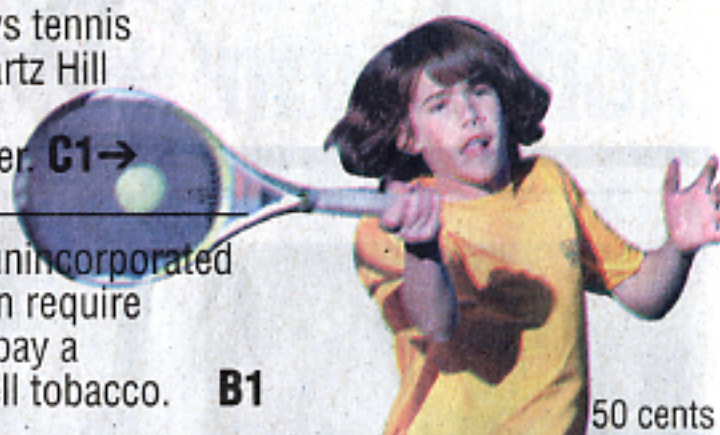
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Good Start

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50 cents

THERAPY THROUGH ART



Mural to Inspire Disabled Students

By Jessica Marks
SIGNAL STAFF WRITER

Painting something for a school project may not be such a big deal for everyone, but for 7-year-old Crysta Evans, painting a section of Valley View Elementary School's new mural proved she was just as talented as every other kid at the school — even though she's disabled.

Sitting in a special wooden wheelchair fitted just for her, Evans was ready to paint all day. Sixth-grader Jose Navarro helped Evans paint by holding the end of her paintbrush and helping her smear the right color of paint in the right spaces.

"I get a little on my clothes sometimes," Evans said, smiling and taking hold of a brush loaded with black paint as she filled in a section of a snow-



Photos by RENEH AGHA/The Signal

(Top) Dhanushka Dassanalke, 11, helps Lucas Jouglet, 12, paint a mural that will be scanned onto vinyl then stretched across the special education room. It's all part of the Special Children's Art Foundation that integrates art and physical therapy. (Above) Jeremy Chlebeck, 10, paints with the help of sixth-grader Sandi Tami at Valley View Elementary School.

boarder's outfit.

But it wasn't just any snowboarder she was painting — he was disabled as well.

The mural depicts extreme adaptive sports and shows how children can participate in horseback riding, snow-

boarding and surfing — thought to be the most difficult — all without the ability to use their limbs on their own.

Once finished, the seven panels that the students creat-

See MURAL, page A5



Mural

Continued from page A1

ed will be scanned onto vinyl, then stretched over an 8-foot by 30-foot wall in the special education room where children can see it every day — and know they helped make something terrific.

It's all part of the Special Children's Art Foundation — a Canyon Country-based organization that integrates art and physical therapy into disabled and ailing children's lives.

"It's a really great opportunity to build awareness," Special Children's founder Marc Kolodziejczyk said.

Kolodziejczyk's own 15-year-old daughter, Kara, born with Rett's Syndrome — a neurodevelopmental disorder occurring in females that affects hand movements and walking abilities — has tried

all of those sports with her dad.

Kolodziejczyk was inspired to draw those times with Kara into scenes on the mural, scenes Valley View students filled in with paint Wednesday.

In a room filled with children armed with buckets of paint and endless stretches of canvas, the room was oddly quiet.

"It's a totally calming therapy," said Nicole Armitage, a foundation representative and artist. "It's a good distraction for the kids."

Armitage helped orchestrate a similar project at Los Angeles Children's Hospital that illustrated a 100-foot jungle scene that sick children painted alongside their families.

During that project, she found that for the hour or so every day that the students painted, they had a chance to forget that they were sick, she

said.

Painting at Valley View, kids seemed less afraid of their disabilities as many students relaxed their elbows and brushed the paint onto the canvases.

Moreover, both disabled and typical students are making friends with each other, a phenomenon that would never have happened otherwise, teachers said.

Valley View Elementary School — the only elementary school in the Santa Clarita Valley designated to teach all of the valley's severely disabled children — has won awards in the past for integrating average students into special education classes and vice versa, principal Gail Abril said.

That makes this mural even more special for Valley View, Abril said.

"It's going to be just beautiful," she said.

And it's meaningful, as well.

On Thursday — as is typical of every single day — a few sixth-graders gave up their lunch recess to spend time with the special education preschool class.

Chris Soltero, 11, knows that his friends in the special day class are different, but he doesn't treat them any differently.

While many of the children in the preschool class are non-verbal, Soltero has learned their sign language and knows when someone is hungry, tired or sad.

"It's just the same as playing with Kylie as it is with Charlton," Soltero said, pointing to one special day class student and another sixth-grader.

Hearing that made preschool teacher Tanya Kalantari well up with tears.

"We're not outsiders. Here, everyone loves them," she said.