

Creating Community Through The Arts

By Sophie Braccini



An assembly at Camino Pablo in front of the new mural depicting Moraga's bucolic scenery. Photos Sophie Braccini

Parent volunteers and artists Shweta Srivastava and Tammy Roake were filled with pride when two murals were inaugurated at Camino Pablo Elementary School May 22. "This project created a real sense of place and community as all the children, the teachers and the parents participated," commented PTA president Sally Whipple after the inauguration.

The school children peacefully sat in the kindergarten playground facing the new 65-foot-long mural during an outdoor assembly. Principal Tom Rust started by thanking Roake, the ceramics artist, and Srivastava, the artist and mother of two Camino Pablo students who designed the painted walls along the kindergarten playground, and the mosaic mural that now adorns the multi-use room. "At the beginning of the (school) year, we asked the teachers what they wanted the PTA to fund this year," explained Whipple. "They didn't want more technology or books. What they asked for was a mural."

Whipple called Srivastava, who painted the mural of the KinderGym at the Lafayette Community Center, and asked her if she wanted to head the project. Srivastava presented a design to Rust, which depicted the local bucolic scenery with plants and animals. The principal wanted to include mosaic pieces in the mural that the children could paint, but the kindergarten teachers warned against placing tiles on a wall where balls are

bounced at recess, so Srivastava proposed two murals: the first, a painting; the second, mosaic tiles.

Srivastava searched the parent community for someone with ceramics experience, and Roake stepped forward. The project started in January, with the two working non-stop, 6 to 8 hours a day.

Srivastava painted the kindergarten mural with the continuous help of former Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School art teacher Lois Mead, as well as some parents. "We had a lot of support from the community," adds Srivastava. "One of my kids is in kindergarten and finished school at noon. As I worked every day until 3 p.m., other parents took turns taking care of my son. The whole community rallied to give us support."

The ceramics wall is made of more than 3,000 pieces, many painted and set by the students and their teachers. The two parent artists created all of the individual pieces: the flowers, the pieces of cloud, the pieces of hills, the bark of the trees, the birds and the insects, and the words that describe life skills illustrated by the images of nature. "The younger kids painted the more simple shapes, while the older students and the teachers painted the most intricate ones," said Srivastava.

"I got to connect with each of the kids a couple times (when they came to paint their piece and when they came to set it in the concrete wall)," said Roake. "It just pays you back

when you get that." Parents also had painting parties to finish the tiles. The result is a beautiful and almost-finished piece of art, dazzling with colors and fragments of mirrors shimmering in the spring sun.

At the May 21 Open House, Roake said she saw kids and parents standing by the murals for a long time. "The kids know exactly which tile they painted and which tile they set; there is a lot of ownership in this project," she said. Other contributors included Olga Jusidman, a ceramics artist who is a member of the Lafayette Art Alliance and who has a ceramics studio in Pleasant Hill called Clay Station Six. "She donated the use of her studio and her expertise," said Srivastava. "All the high-fired porcelain pieces were fired in her studio."

The PTA funded all the raw materials, and most of this year's Read-a-thon Fund went to the murals project. "Not only did we have two incredible people leading this project, but everyone took pride in it," said Whipple. "For the school, it brought a sense of community that I don't think anything else could have accomplished."

The celebration finished up with Carol St. Clair coming out of retirement to sing with the children the song, "The Hills of Moraga," that she wrote for Moraga students years ago. As they exited the kindergarten playground, the children gave flowers to the two artists and some of them spontaneously came up to thank them for the murals.



From left, Sally Whipple, Tammy Roake and Shweta Srivastava in front of the mosaic depicting life skills in a natural setting.

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