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Moraga's Got Chalk!

By *Sophie Braccini*



Having a mayor who is an artist definitely helps to foster vibrancy in the local art scene. Kathe Nelson, Moraga Chamber's executive director, immediately got a positive response and added impetus from Moraga Mayor Teresa Onoda when she suggested a chalk festival in Moraga.

Onoda put her weight behind the project and decided to make it part of this year's Pear and Wine Festival. Several groups of budding and confirmed chalk artists will for the first time create visual art with the evanescent medium Sept. 23 at the Moraga Commons Park. While some school teams are already created, interested youth can join in the fun starting at 10:30 a.m. that Saturday.

Nelson says that she was always been mesmerized by three-dimensional chalk art. Her first discussion with Onoda started eight months ago. Cheri Grant, who works

at Saint Mary's College and is a member of the local Kiwanis was involved and received a grant from the service group to fund the idea. It was not enough to invite professional artists, but enough to buy chalk and invite local schools to participate.

Onoda suggested locating the chalk event artists on the basketball court, next to the skate park during the festival, and to have the artists focus on existing art in town: the statues that are part of the Art in Public Spaces program, lent to the town by local artists and installed at the library and in front of the town's chamber offices. The idea, Onoda explains, is for the groups of artists to choose a statue, imagine a magical setting for it, and make a chalk image of it.

The mayor contacted parents, going to the Orion Academy and to Saklan School to present the project.

Kristin Lamb who teaches art at the Orion Academy said that the project immediately resonated with her. The Moraga school is a college prep institution for ninth- to 12th-grade students with Asperger's Syndrome. Lamb explains that many of the alumni are now in art schools in the Bay Area and wanted to be part of the Moraga project. Marian (who asked that we not use her last name), is an Orion alum studying in Oakland at the California College of the Arts, and will be the leader of the project with five or six other students. The students have already chosen the statue they will reproduce within a magical environment: David Mudgett's Drain 2. Lamb adds that art is used consistently at the academy and incorporated with other areas of study, such as history. She loves the idea of the students' art being showcased in the community where they study.

At Saklan the project was met with similar enthusiasm. The Moraga school teaches children pre-K to eighth grade and art teacher Natalie Palms said that the challenge was to not only find young talented artists, but students who work well in a team with different age groups. She selected five students from third to eighth grade, with a cooperative artistic temperament. Palms explained that the children were very excited to be producing art outside of the school, in public. She explained that the discussion process taking place before Sept. 23 will include choosing the sculpture, and defining the magical environment that will incorporate everybody's personality in the final project.

The students will arrive on site at 10:30 a.m. and are anticipated to work for several hours. They will also write poems near their art.

Onoda confirmed that all children are encouraged to come, even if teams were not formed prior to the event. On site they will be given images of the sculptures and a round space to create their own magic.

The mayor stresses that this is not a competition. It is a way to inspire and share art in the town. Nelson adds that the East Bay Municipal Utility District hired a 3D chalk artist who will create chalk art representing the underlying pipes going from the basketball court to the fountain, while artist Suzanne D'Arcy will chalk a pear tree at the end of the pipe.

Local children's book authors will also be part of the event, reading their stories to visitors. Onoda hopes that this event, creating art for art's sake, will become a tradition in Moraga and help develop the branding of the small town as a vibrant place to live and create.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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