

Arts in Mind

Old Mill School's Mural is a Labor of Love

By Suz Lipman

If you have strolled along Lovell Avenue, behind Old Mill School, this spring, you may have caught sight of a very colorful, cheerful mural at the amphitheatre that faces into the school playground. The mural is the result of five months of work on the part of Old Mill's 3rd grade students and teachers, sister school Bahia Vista in San Rafael's Canal District, mural artist Josef Norris, and his program, Kid Serve, which educates children and lets them add to their communities by creating joyous public art.

The process began last winter, when the Old Mill students in Erica Dowell's, John Selix's and Denise Strecker's 3rd grade classes wrote and received letters from pen pals at San Rafael's Bahia Vista School. The children shared information about their schools, their communities, and each school's mural project. Each school also constructed parts of the others' mural. "Their mural is about school and learning," The Old Mill students wrote in their school newsletter. "Our mural is about the Tamalpais Watershed. When you see it, you'll see a person reading against a tree, little bugs that live in the creek environment, trees, fish, and the creek itself."

The students further described the process of creating the mural: "We observed the creek and drew sketches. We made clay figures and painted tiles. The artist, Josef Norris, painted an outline on the amphitheatre, and then we began tiling, cementing, and grouting a little bit each week for two months. We even had one big Saturday when our families came to help with the tiling." One of the highlights, the students wrote, was going before the School Board to ask permission to create the mural.

"This project was my 66th mural residency in Bay Area schools," said mural artist and Kid Serve Director, Josef Norris, "It was by far the most ambitious, because it involved over 115 kids at two different schools -- we wanted a "sister" project that brought together the 3rd graders at Old Mill with two classes of kids at Bahia Vista Elementary School in San Rafael's Canal District."

Norris continued, "Every mural is similar -- and radically different. Every mural reflects the kids who put so much of themselves into it. I worked with these kids once a week for 16 weeks during one of the worst rainy seasons I've ever experienced. We worked on bitterly cold days. I also got to meet a lot of the parents who came out on the Saturday Mural Day to help build their mural. On these projects you have this amazing bonding experience with this school community of kids, teacher and parents, and then the project ends. The mural, of course, remains for many years to come."

The Old Mill children wrote, "We will remember putting in the cement to get it started and putting on our first and last tiles. We will remember all the stages of this process and getting to meet our pen pals from Bahia Vista. We also will remember Josef, who was a

great teacher for the mural and also a great friend. We liked that this mural represents our Old Mill School community and that nature is important to us.”

Before it was graced with creatures from our local watershed, and the lucky person reading in nature, the amphitheatre was comprised of a blank cement wall and steps. Now it’s a permanent art piece that reflects Mill Valley’s special surroundings and ecosystem, as well as the joy of creating a collaborative art project. It’s also a unique place for the school population to gather. The first gathering occurred at the mural’s unveiling in March, and students from Bahia Vista school took part, as did Old Mill students at the Bahia Vista ceremony.

The mural unveilings at each school is what Norris said he will remember the most. “The kids had been writing pen-pal letters to each other all semester and there was all this anticipation about when they would finally meet and see each other's mural. At first they were shy, but eventually they had a great time.”

Old Mill School Principal, Jane McDonough, said “We went from blank wall to community celebration. We are delighted with the results. I think someday we will be bragging that Old Mill has a Josef Norris-student work!”

Since 1999, Kid Serve has helped schools and other groups around the Bay Area complete more than 66 youth murals. Many of the student muralists who work with Kids Serve are in underserved areas, and part of the educational component includes studying and writing about the impact of their murals on the community.

Josef Norris has also done commissioned murals for Starbucks, the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, the San Francisco Neighborhood Beautification Fund, the San Francisco Department of Recreation and Parks, the City of Oakland, and MUNI. He is probably best known for the large mural, “Dancing in the Curve of the World”, comprised of happy dancing children, located at the Performing Arts Garage at Gough and Fulton Streets in San Francisco. He recently completed a huge mosaic mural overlooking the Kid Power Park at 67 Hoff Street (near San Francisco’s 16th & Mission Streets.)

You can read more about Josef Norris' work at: www.josefnorris.com. For more information about the Kid Serve program, go to www.kidserve.com.

There is also a book about the Old Mill/Bahia Vista mural project, called "The Sister Project: Bringing Two Communities Together". It is available at www.kidserve.com.

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“Arts in Mind” is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education. Suz Lipman is a writer and parent in the Mill Valley School District.

