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Walls open doors Murals teach teens art, responsibility

Mark Simon

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In a pool of white thrown by three portable lights, Miguel Hernandez, 16, and Tyler Prehm, 18, were hunched beneath a scaffolding, wielding tiny paintbrushes to paint a very small portion of a very large mural.

Just on the very edge of the light, crouching over the tanbark of an adjacent playground, Rafael Melendrez, 15, Yasmin Alvelo, 14, and Nora Flores, 14, were mixing white paint with cadmium red. Nora had the white paint smeared thickly on her hand.

Class was in session.

It was a school night, and the painters and the paint mixers were part of a group of teenagers working on a 35- by 15-foot mural on the northern wall of Willow Oaks School in Menlo Park.

The mural was a job, a research project and serious public art -- the ninth one produced by the East Palo Alto Mural Arts Project, a nonprofit that hires local teenagers for eight weeks and teaches them how to research and create a mural under the supervision of noted muralist Omar Ramirez, 30.

The mural also is a lesson in responsibility, conducted under the attentive eye of a no-nonsense dynamo, Sonya Clark-Herrera, 30, who founded the mural arts project with Ramirez.

Since the project began in March 2001, its murals have graced five buildings in the city's Ravenswood City School District. Three portable murals on canvas were made for the East Palo Alto Boys & Girls Club, the city of East Palo Alto and Stanford University.

These are not typical elementary-school with rainbows and handprints and one-dimensional figures.

The first mural, created in two parts on the walls of Cesar Chavez Academy, depicts the creation of East Palo Alto in 1983. It features a Latina girl, wearing a soccer jersey with the symbol of the United Farm Workers. She's holding the hand of her father.

"People don't think we have dads here," said Clark-Herrera. . To contact the East Palo Alto Mural

Arts Project, go to www.epamap.org on the Web or call (650) 520-8061.

The mural is a stunning array of bold colors, characteristic of the murals of Ramirez, but, as he points out, not in his style.

Ramirez, who has done celebrated artwork in Los Angeles and New York City, works on the murals full time. That includes teaching the teenagers how to think about art, how to translate their thoughts into art, and how to collaborate on the final product.

"I've learned more of an understanding of how to create a mural collaboratively," Ramirez said. "Each of us had to learn the mural is not my idea, not my vision. We had to learn how to do it devoid of any ego and still get an idea across."

Other murals offer further collective thoughts on East Palo Alto, an ethnically diverse mid-Peninsula community that has struggled economically and educationally.

They depict the nearby baylands as they might have been if left undeveloped;

the history of Ravenswood High School, which closed in 1976; and a pseudo- ancient temple wall with traditional and newly created hieroglyphs depicting the past, present and future of East Palo Alto education.

The murals are pointed in their message and exude the energy of youth, but with a level of artwork that is astonishing.

"You can be surprised by what a 14-year-old can do if you give them the skills and the tools," Clark-Herrera said.

"It's not just about the murals," Ramirez said. "It's about getting kids interested in being involved in their community."

The Willow Oaks project, formally unveiled at a ceremony Monday night, is called "Underneath It All" and depicts Silicon Valley as a maze of buildings and freeways. The concrete and asphalt have been split apart by a deep fissure,

and in the crevasse are the ancestral bones of the Muwekma Ohlone Indians.

The bones were found in the 1950s when a portion of East Palo Alto was excavated for development. They went to Stanford, where they were categorized and stored. In 1990, the Muwekmas persuaded Stanford to return the bones, which were reburied in Coyote Hills Regional Park.

The mural shows a girl reassembling the bones. Bright flowers rise from the cracks. Hovering above

are the spirits of the Muwekma people, depicted as clouds formed lightly into skull shapes.

"I like what it does for the community," Tyler Prehm said as he used his tiny brush to layer colors. "White walls are boring. When you have a mural in town, it livens things up."

Rafael Melendrez, working alongside Prehm, said, "If I do this, it's going to stay in the community. When I come by, I can say, 'I worked on that.' "

Another thing Melendrez likes about the project: "We get paid."

The teenagers work for \$9 an hour. Entry requirements include a two-week course on painting, an admissions test and an interview before a panel.

Those accepted spend four weeks researching a theme for the mural. Only then do they paint a mural, which takes another four weeks.

Nineteen kids have worked on the Willow Oaks mural. More than 60 have worked on the project's murals in total. There are more than 60 names on the waiting list for the next mural.

Clark-Herrera started the project to create summer jobs for East Palo Alto youth. But Clark-Herrera also has some serious academic credentials -- including undergraduate and master's degrees in anthropology -- and she has designed the program as an educational undertaking, with measurable results in self-esteem, art, history, in-school performance and the practicalities of showing up to work on time and filling out a time card.

"We're not doing anything new in East Palo Alto," Clark-Herrera said. "We're riding the wave of activism, the history of activism that has always been present in this community. We're just doing it with our voice and in our new style."

As some teenagers painted the Willow Oaks mural a few days before its unveiling, two others worked on the wording of a plaque that would tell the story of the Muwekma bones.

And Clark-Herrera was charging from one part of the site to another -- reciting the history the students were depicting, quizzing them on the meaning of the mural, instructing, with Ramirez, on stroke technique and the proper way to mix colors for skin tones.

Then, standing just outside the lights, she opened an envelope, took out a stack of paychecks and began calling out: "Who loves learning history? Come get paid."

The paychecks are a central element of the experience, and a major dilemma for the mural project.

Budgeted for about \$200,000 per year, the project is woefully short of money. More than 60 percent of the budget goes to pay the kids, 20 percent to supplies, and 9 percent to an organization

that manages the project's books.

About 15 percent is supposed to go to Ramirez and Clark-Herrera. Ramirez gets paid, but it's nothing compared with what he could earn selling his own art.

Ramirez says there are other ways he could make money, "but this is what I do. Hopefully, the work stands on its own. . . . I guess this is my passion."

Clark-Herrera has never drawn a salary.

She and others spent last weekend cleaning out neighborhood gutters and raking lawns to raise the money necessary to keep the program going.

Donations from local foundations and corporations got the program up and running, and other grants have been coming in, but the future of the program is in serious jeopardy.

"We so desperately don't want to give up," Clark-Herrera said. "We're doing everything to stay afloat."

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Sonya Clark-Herrera checks a mural at Edison Brentwood Academy in East Palo Alto. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward



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East Palo Alto Mural Arts Project member Tyler Prehm paints a portion of a mural at the Willow Oaks School in Menlo Park. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward



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Project members prepare to work on a mural at Willow Oaks School in Menlo Park. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward



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