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Bit by bit, the learning grows

Mural blends arts into curriculum

By John Laidler

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

It's a work of art created by 465 pairs of hands.

A once-drab hallway in Sharon's Cottage Street School is now adorned by a sweeping mosaic mural of dazzling colors.

The 45-foot-long piece was created over a three-week period by students working with artist-in-residence Joshua Winer, along with teachers and parents.

Called "Growing the Garden," the painstakingly crafted work depicts the natural environment surrounding the elementary school, which abuts a pond and waterfall. It includes images of flowers, fish, turtles, snails, birds, and trees.

All 465 students participated. Some made tiles and affixed them to the wall. Others sculpted letters to spell "Cottage Street School" across the mural's archway.

The mosaic mural project kicked off a two-year school program to celebrate the arts and better integrate them into the curriculum. A \$13,000 grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council is funding the effort. The grant, and \$6,500 in matching funds provided by the school through parent donations, pays for the services of Winer and other artists-in-residence, including a musician, a poet, and a dance troupe. Performances and teacher workshops will also be featured.

"We want the arts to become a part of everything we do," said Cottage School principal John Marcus.



Artist-in-residence Joshua Winer takes a photograph of two of his 10-year-old trainees, George Rakushkin (left) and Samuel D'arcy, in front of their school mural.

Enthusiasm was running high at an assembly last Friday at which students, staff, parents, Winer, and others celebrated the completion of the mural. A highlight was high-energy drumming by the musical artist-in-residence, Joe Sallins and an accomplice. Some of the students added to the percussive effort.

Fifth-graders Helene Peck, Sophie Tollefson, and Jennifer Shone worked on the section of the mural that depicts a worm and an egg.

Peck said she liked to "feel the tiles" in her

hands as she helped place them on the mural.

"I liked all the colors of it," said Tollefson. "You got to put it on the wall. It makes the whole school look pretty."

Shone said that gluing on the tiles made her "feel like there's a piece of you on that mural to last forever and ever."

Mim Fawcett, a parent volunteer, said that in addition to its educational benefits, the project helps the effort to beautify the school, which recently underwent a major renovation. The goal is to make the building "look

SCHOOL MOSAIC, Page 8

Mosaic blends arts into curriculum

Continued from Page 1

like a place that children live in and learn in."

Marcus said they "took what was a dank and boring interior lobby and turned it into an incredible piece of art — bright, beautiful, colorful. And it's a celebration of Sharon history and the Cottage history."

Diane Daily, coordinator for the Cultural Council's Creative Schools Program, through which the state grant was awarded, praised the Cottage Street School project.

"It's absolutely amazing, the involvement of the whole school, building a community around the artwork," she said, adding that the mural "is beautiful. The kids can see themselves in it, the parents can see the school in it."

"It was a whole learning opportunity for the kids — it was an experience they had actually making art. And they had to think. It involves math, it involves writing, it involves color choice. It involves all kinds of things that they are trying to learn in their regular classrooms."

Winer, a Waltham resident, has painted many murals in Cambridge and Boston. He may be best known for his spacious outdoor mural on Boston's Newbury Street. Over the past five years, he has begun working on mosaic murals. Mosaics are typically made of bits of glass, tile, or stones arranged to create an image.

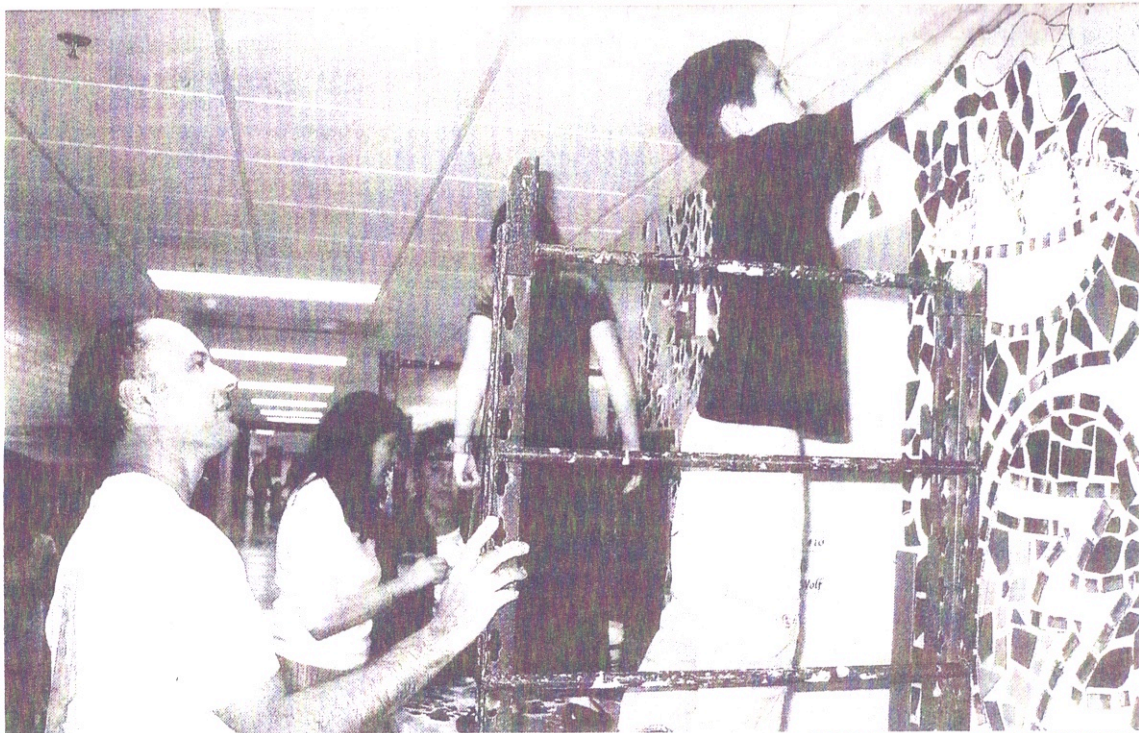


PHOTO COURTESY COTTAGE STREET SCHOOL

Cottage Street School third-grader Liam Murphy gets some support from artist-in-residence Joshua Winer while placing a tile high on their mosaic mural project, "Growing the Garden."

Winer began the project at the Cottage School with a sketch that he drew on a cement board mounted on the wall. The next step was to assemble the objects that would go into the mosaic, including commercial and handmade tiles, mirrors, and shells, plates and marbles brought in by students. On some of the handmade tiles, students carved images of local historical buildings.

Students helped glue tiles and other objects onto the mural, following Winer's design. Colored grout was placed in the spaces around the objects.

Winer said there is a certain freedom in working with children that he does not always find creating commissioned works for adults.

"We are all going through this creative journey together," he said.

Jennifer Biddle, an art teacher at Cottage who worked closely with Winer on the mural, said she was inspired by the experience, which she hopes to build upon.

"It was amazing to see the kids come together," Biddle said. "One of the things I really liked was how different grades worked on different levels. It's really a culmination of all the kids in the school working toward one common goal."