

Rose Avenue a symbol of community spirit

Students help paint new murals depicting St. James Town

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Located within the inner-city St. James Town community, Rose Avenue Junior Public School has become a symbol of the great things that can be accomplished when a community bands together.

The school celebrated the completion of a series of murals depicting the diversity and positivity within the community last week. The murals, painted by local artist Marsha Stonehouse and Rose Avenue students, will adorn Rose Avenue's portables and mark yet another step in a long-running beautification program at the school.

The school partnered with Manulife Financial to help create a safe and fun playground and green space on school grounds for children whose recreational needs might otherwise go unfulfilled. Local agencies such as Evergreen and Inner City Angels also supported the school, making the revitalization efforts a true community effort.

Rose Avenue principal Marguerite Campbell said the four-year revitalization process has been a boon not only to students of the school but to the neighbourhood as a whole.

"The kids at the school all live in apartment buildings, and we really needed a new playground," she said. "Here's a community that doesn't have a lot of money, but with everyone coming together, it increased the amount of green space they have."

In addition to the murals and new playscape, Rose Avenue recently added new trees on their grounds, saw synthetic turf installed on the neighbourhood's soccer field and planted a new community garden that grows herbs and other plants. Junior students at the school painted small panels that adorn fences and trees around Rose Avenue.

Few of the initiatives, however, display as much community pride as the murals, which depict life in St. James Town and promote messages of equality, peace, respect and joy.

"We wanted them to reflect the community, so what you see on the murals is a combination of things the students have written and pictures taken by (Stonehouse)," Campbell said. "It's all about who we are and where we live."

At Campbell's request, one of the murals promotes social justice in the culturally diverse neighbourhood.

"My opinion on multiculturalism is that it's really what fuels social justice," Campbell said. "I wanted to represent that (justice) instead of just showing a bunch of different festivals."

The overall revitalization cost roughly \$500,000 over the past five years, with the lion's share of that money coming from Manulife. Campbell noted, however, that Manulife and its employees contributed more than money to the project.

"We've had volunteers from Manulife come in here every Wednesday and do math work and other activities with kids," she said. "I have a real problem with just doling out money to poor communities, and Manulife really stepped up in so many ways."

The long-running series of improvements to the school and community has helped foster a sense of belonging and community pride among Rose Avenue students.

Sixth grader Iman Moallim, whose father recently won a YMCA Peace Medallion for his work in the community, and third grader Nathan Tran helped beautify the school grounds, which gave them a feeling of personal ownership over their little oasis within the city.

"I think when (the murals) go up, that we're going to be very popular with the kids at our school," Moallim said. "It was fun just to help other students do something that looks nice for our school."

Tran said he particularly enjoyed helping to make the school's community garden a reality, adding that he loves what it offers to students and those within the neighbourhood.

"I really like being able to plant and pick things," he said. "We grew and picked basil and made pesto, then ate the pesto with crackers. I want to keep planting every year until I finish school."