

Angels visit Weston school

JEFF HAYWARD

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Call it the art of building self-esteem.

Students at CR Marchant Middle School, near the Etobicoke border in Weston, recently took part in the Voyageur project incorporating various disciplines of art including a mural spanning three storeys of the school that paints a picture of Canada's history.

The school worked with Inner City Angels, placing artists in priority schools. The goal: engage inner city children and inspire them through art.

That mission was accomplished, said CR Marchant Principal Roula Skordakis.

"They've taken such pride (in the art)," said Skordakis, who said students in groups worked on the project in rotation. "This just boosted their self-esteem."

While it's nice to look at, the visual art is also a learning tool, she said.

"(The students) had to learn all about the (country's) history," explained the principal. "The Grade 6 teachers love it, they use it in their curriculum in social studies."

A handful of the school's Grade 8 students showed off some of their contributions to the mural during a recent visit from The Guardian.

Debbie Zaratan and Virginia Williams stood beside an image of Niagara Falls.

"We worked on this section for almost three weeks," said Zaratan. "Niagara is a big part of Canada."

Then smiling, Zaratan added, "It looks really good. You can tell our hard work paid off."

Kajan Thevarajah chose to add a deer to the painting. "I did a deer because they roam around and I think we students should be free too," he said. Added his colleague, I'mmanuel Warner-Brown, "(The art) makes me feel proud that we're in this country and we have freedom."

CR Marchant is one of several schools across the city that Inner City Angels has worked with, said the organization's executive director, Jane Howard Baker. For example, she said, her group recently received \$48,000 from Manulife Financial to provide a year-long arts project to Rose Avenue Public School in St. Jamestown. In the last two years Angels has also teamed up with Hollycrest Middle School, West Humber Junior Public School and a handful of others, she added.



Angels visit Weston school. Students at CR Marchant Middle School have just completed huge murals that run up three floors of a stairwell at their school. Here some of the artists are left to right, Virginia Williams, Nikina Ranger, Deborah Zaratan, Riley Graff, Kajan Thevarajah and I'Mmanuel Warner-Brown. *Staff photo/IAN KELSO*

In the case of CR Marchant, the Department of Canadian Heritage (Celebrate Canada) and Ontario Trillium Foundation supported the art initiative there, noted Howard Baker. The project incorporated music - Angels also works with "sister" arts organization Mariposa in the Schools - and Angels inherited a "substantial sum" from the estate of Etobicoke's Beatrice Titley who bequeathed cash for music programs, noted the executive director.

The funding, including help from the Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council, was beneficial, said Skordakis.

"When you're an inner-city middle school, you just don't have the money to do this (on your own)," she said.

Howard Baker said her organization invests \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year in subsidies to make art projects affordable to schools.

"But we don't begin with the subsidy, we begin with the idea and develop that into an enriching arts program," she noted. "Then we fundraise and cost-share."

The themes for the art projects, called "the big idea", are a collaboration between the teachers, students and artists, she added.

Angels freelances the services of artists who bring more to the table than artistic skill, said Howard Baker.

"It requires the ability to work with young children, often children from different countries who are now living in priority neighbourhoods," she noted.

Allycia Uccello, an artist living in Campbellford, was paired with CR Marchant for their project. But Angels' other artists are more local, including Etobicoke's Ken Kettlewell, Lorna Livey and Natalie McHaffie, she said.

The group's website, www.innercityangels.ca, notes the arts education charity was founded in 1969 by social activist and entrepreneur Marianne Heller and Principal Douglas Balmer of Regent Park/Duke of York Public School, "who were committed to breaking barriers for inner city children to experience the joy of hands on participation in the arts."