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PERIODICALS

## PS/MS 194 unveils student-designed mural to beautify school

by Jon Minners

In the fall of 2003, the new Zerega School P.S./M.S. 194 accepted its first students on what was a glorious day for parents and community leaders who fought hard for the school's creation. But as the students took their first steps into the school, it was clear that despite its breathtaking construction and beautiful landscape, something was missing. Now that void has finally been filled.

Students joined proud parents, teachers, administrators and elected leaders on Tuesday, May 16, as the school dedicated a colorful mural to the surrounding community. The mural features two large pieces of art envisioned by the students as the final touches to the school's design.

"This is indeed a very proud moment," said principal Thomas DeGrazia. "As we near the end of our third year at this school, we see a number of faces from the beginning of our journey, who fought for this school to be built on a vacant lot. But when it was built, we had two huge open spaces here that we intended to fill with a symbol of our involvement in the community."

A project was commissioned through the Sites for Students program of the Department of Education and the School Construction Authority. Professional artists could have filled those spaces at the school's entrance, but school staff instead had the first group of sixth-graders come up with a design that they would leave behind when they graduated.

"Every new school is supposed to have a Percent of Art project, and this mural highlights the creativity of the students here," said Councilman Jimmy Vacca, who was in attendance for the dedication along with a representative from Senator Jeff Klein's office. "I am here to wish you all luck today and to tell you all what a pleasure it is to be here. We are here to work with you on projects like this and it is great to see that everyone at P.S./M.S. 194 is doing such a great job."

The mural's completion comes thanks in part to professional artist Michele Brody, who was brought into the school to work with the students in collaboration with their art teacher, Helen Serrano. Students learned the art process, were given guidelines

and slowly but surely came up with a design for the mural and the plaques that accompany the artwork.

Although Brody was a huge help in making the project a reality, school officials said, she gave a lot of credit to the students and Serrano. "They were just excited right from the beginning," Brody said. "They had a lot of ideas. It was truly a collaborative effort."

Once the design was created, Lenka M. Kohoutova of Sherle Wagner hand painted the ceramic tile matching the student design and installed it as a lasting tribute to the school's birth in the community.

"It is called the 'Universe of Knowledge,'" said Sarmina Sathi, an eighth-grader at the school, who explained the process behind the creation of the mosaics. "First thing we had done was to make sketches of our school. Then we painted and created collages. We also made mosaic pieces with tiles, which were wonderful. This taught us how the mosaic outside of the building was supposed to look."

Sathi states that as seventh-graders last year, the students learned about madalas, which is the inspiration for the design, allowing those who pass by to see one design and those who come closer to see something totally different in the pieces of art, made up of over 150 pairs of tiles. "This was the part of the project I know most of us enjoyed making—the designs with tiles," said Sathi. "That was a very unique experience for us. Not only did we gain knowledge from this project, students learned how to work cooperatively in groups and work together. Our teachers went into depth about how working together as a team is very important when it comes to big project such as this."

Those in attendance described the project as a thing of beauty. "It's here and it is a beautiful tribute to this school," said assistant principal Erika Tobia. "The best part about this is, it will be here forever. This is something everyone in the community and everyone who passes by will look on in amazement. And it is thanks to Helen Serrano. She is such a dedicated teacher and this project is a credit to her profession."

But Serrano was modest in accepting acclaim for the project. "I love it," said Serrano, who also discussed the



Councilman Jimmy Vacca joins P.S./M.S. 194 principal Thomas DeGrazia, students, teachers and artists in unveiling the new mural on the outside of the three-year-old school building, located at 1301 Zerega Avenue. — PHOTO BY WALTER POFELDT/JM

process and credited the kids for their creativity, as well as Brody's efforts on a weekly basis during the entire run of the project. "There are just so many wonderful designs there," she added, turning her attention back to the mosaic. "You really see something different every time."

Parent coordinator Lois Lombardi was proud of the children for their accomplishment. "It is always a joy working with them," she said. "This

is just a beautiful work of art. The students worked so hard on this. It's amazing and it is something that will be embedded in this community and in their hearts forever."

Including that of Justin Bermudez, the eighth grade student who created one of the plaques on display near one of the mosaics. "It was fun and now 30 years later, I can come with my kids and show them I accomplished something," he said.