

The Art of Learning

by Katherine Morris

Erick Whittman has been drawing and doodling for most of his life.

"Whenever I had a pen and paper, I'd just draw—something, anything," said the 13-year-old as he finished up an impressive sketch of a Quetzal last week.

Whittman is one of several local youth learning to put their artistic skills to good use with a mural project being sponsored by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, the Suenos Collaborative and the Caminos Project and several other local groups.

In the next few weeks, the group is slated to begin work on the 9-foot by 34-foot section of the wall on the exterior of the Watsonville Community School, located off Airport Boulevard.

Martine Watkins, Caminos Project Coordinator, is one of several people heading up the project.

"My whole idea with this mural was that a lot of the kids I've worked with get into trouble for graffiti or vandalism, but with the mural, it's a positive way for them to put their artwork out onto walls," Watkins said.

The Caminos Project, a partnership between the Santa Cruz County Office of Education's Alternative Education program and the Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz County, provides community service opportunities for youth who have been suspended or expelled from school.

"I thought it would be a fun, artistic way for them to express themselves through art in a way that would benefit the community," Watkins said. "It also benefits the students because they are learning a lot—about art and their heritage."

Part of the mural project involves a research component, in which students are responsible for finding information about the history of Watsonville and their ancestors, in hopes of developing images and symbols to incorporate in the mural.

A possible theme for the mural that the group is exploring is "From past to present," that would take a historical look at the people who've lived in the local area over time and where their ancestors came from.

"For students who aren't as into drawing, this is a great way for them to get involved," Watkins said.

Karen Lemon of the County Office of Education's Students in Transition program is helping students document their progress along the way through photography and video footage

Students working on the project also have the benefit of working with acclaimed local muralist Yermo Aranda.

Two of Watkins' former students, one of whom is Whittman, are getting paid a stipend to work on the mural and serve as student leaders.

"It's great! Getting to draw and earning money," Whittman said with a smile.

Those interested in donating money or supplies such as paint to the project are encouraged to contact Martine Watkins at 334-0399.

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