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SPOTLIGHTS

Making Meaningful Art

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On the last, sunny day of the school year, when children across Baltimore County had their sights set on summer break yawning before them, students at Stoneleigh Elementary School gazed intently instead on six, brightly-colored panels adorning their schoolhouse walls.

It was time to unveil a special art project at Stoneleigh.

"What do you see?" Principal Christine Warner asked a tour group of students as they – and the school's other children all morning – began to make their way through the front commons area and down a hall to the school cafeteria, near where the last of the panels was displayed. "What

places do you see?"

The answers came fast: "Mountains!" "A forest!" "A city!" "The beach!" "A farm!"

The children would know – despite the stylized artwork, a sort of collage- mural. The panel was crowded with images and shapes and colors, all depicting the communities and natural regions of Maryland; it was art they had chosen and inspired. The panels were part of a project to create "Green School"-themed art through a unique collaboration between all of Stoneleigh's students and award-winning artist Jay Wolf Schlossberg-Cohen.

Starting in March, students in each grade level researched topics related to environmental education – seasons, the Chesapeake Bay, or endangered animals, for example. Using images and ideas gathered and created by students – their artwork drafts lined the hallways – "Mr. Jay" and his student helpers went to work to create each of the six panels, one representing each grade level.

"The goal of this project for was to create an opportunity for students to participate in a community project that would stay with them long after the work was over," said Stoneleigh art teacher Dana Link, who raised \$17,000 to accomplish the installation.

"Students were challenged to look at the environment as a whole -- the problems, the solutions, the ways in which we can celebrate the earth and its beauty and the ways in which we may feel empowered to help," Link said. "The aptly-named project is "Green Dreams: We Are Stewards." . . . The impact of this project will empower the artists and inspire the viewers of the work for years to come."

In each panel, Cohen hid Maryland's official state insect, the checkerspot butterfly, as a tribute to Stoneleigh. And in the final panel near the lunch room, one depicting the school house and environment of the surrounding neighborhood, Cohen included a riot of checkerspot butterflies hovering over the roof of the building.

For many of the student artists, the project was a hit. "It was bigger than I thought it was going to be. People will wonder what all of the objects are," said Grade 1 student Clementine Lingg. "My whole family didn't know about the checkerspot butterfly, and now I can tell them about it."

Added Evan Cline, a Grade 1 student, "It was exciting because we didn't know how it would turn out. But when it was finished, it was fantastic. People will wonder, 'Who made that?'"

And Grade 5 student Molly Kinkead, herself moving on to middle school and pondering the legacy she helped to leave behind, said, "It was fun to be a part of the mural because it will be there a long time"

Cohen said working with the students and taking inspiration from their artwork was a wonderful process. In the final stages of completing the panels in his studio and preparing to display them at the school, parents pitched in to help. Asked if he was pleased with the final product, Cohen credits his assistants. "Why did it turn out so well?" he asks rhetorically as he greets another gaggle of students. "Well, I had 750 assistants."

Warner says the project was a bit unusual for Cohen, who typically specializes in community-based public art. "He usually works only on murals, so this was really asking him to do something outside his comfort zone," she said.

"The overarching theme that 'We are Stewards' is also representative," Warner said. "We are stewards of the children and families we serve. They entrust their children to us each day for more waking hours than they actually have to spend with them, knowing full well that they will learn and achieve well.

Finally, said Warner, who retired this year after 31 years in public education, "it also completes the vision for the look I had hoped for in finishing our newly-renovated schoolhouse! The work is inspired by children and has a profound child-like quality that draws you into this remarkable place of learning.

"It was such a remarkable way to end our year."



