

Probation camp mural gives girls a place to envision their hopes

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Student artists put their names on the mural they created following a dedication ceremony for the Wall of Hope mural at the Camp Scudder probation facility for girls in Saugus on Friday, Jan. 15, 2010. The mural was painted by teens from the camp in their dining hall. (Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer)

Bright, vivid and cheerful are not usually the words used to describe the dining halls of juvenile probation camps.

However a group of 30 girls, serving sentences at Camp Kenyon J. Scudder probation camp in Santa Clarita, were able to bring just that to their eating area with a massive mural project that was designed and drawn by the inmates ranging from ages 12 to 18.

The 45-foot-wide mural with bright images of red roses emerging from concrete, silver escalators reaching toward blue skies, and with "Faith" written in bold letters, was dedicated Friday afternoon at a ceremony at Camp Scudder.

"These girls made a lasting contribution that shows this can be a place where bright things happen," said Charlie Phelps, a math teacher at Camp Scudder who worked with the girls on the art project.

Titled the "Wall of Hope," the mural was a first of its kind collaboration between Los Angeles County Probation Department, the County Office of Education, the Arts Commission and county Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich along with Los Angeles based nonprofit Theatre of Hearts/Youth First.

"This was the first-time we took on a project of this magnitude, with so many agencies teamed up, and things turned out great," said Michael Massenburg, the artist who was brought in to work with the girls on the mural.

Massenburg said the 14-week workshop took the teenage girls through an arts bootcamp that included learning primary colors, basic drawing and painting, art history and a study of murals.

During that time, the girls also decided what themes and concepts they would include in their massive piece.

"These girls really exceeded my expectations because they didn't just embrace the art," Massenburg said.

"They opened up emotionally, talked about their personal negative experiences and used it to make something beautiful."

Pauline Starks, director of Camp Scudder, said she noticed a "significant change" in the girls' attitudes, behavior and even grades during the mural project.

"I really enjoyed watching the girls paint the walls and their proud faces when showing off their accomplishments to visitors," Starks said.

Massenburg said he asked the girls to come up with images that reflected their views of success and failure, but during the process Massenburg said he believes he helped launch the careers of at least a few budding artists.

Massenburg said he plans to connect with local art colleges when they complete their sentences.

"These girls really flourished," he said.