

Western Hills Elementary marks beginning of new era with muralBy MICHOLYN FAJEN community@dmreg.com

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Western Hills Elementary families and students are capping a yearlong remodeling project of the school by producing a 24-foot mosaic tile mural to decorate the newly renovated school when it opens next fall. The mural builds on the theme, "New Beginnings - Preserving Memories While Creating New Ones." Western Hills parent and RDG Planning and Design partner Jeff Blosser designed the mural to include landmark images from the schoolgrounds and surrounding neighborhood. The students will return to the school in August after spending this year at the Clegg Park building while Western Hills is renovated.

"These images incorporated in the mural are icons and signage within the neighboring community. As the image progresses down the mural it becomes more fluid, and the gardens, which are an important part of Western Hills' history, take off and overtake the piece," Blosser said. But moving from the idea phase to physically producing art becomes both a partnership and a lesson. Blosser will be featured during the school's annual Artist in Residence week, which is May 18-22. The weeklong event educates students on a specific craft. This year, Blosser will bring his architectural trade to the classrooms and allow students to play a creative role in building the mural.

Mural project co-chairwoman Susan Bridge said Blosser will take a sketch, use computer software to break apart the color layers and print a sort of large create-by-numbers grid for students to follow and build upon. "They will take over the Clegg Park gym and have sections of the mural laid out. The first panel is more detailed imaging and will be created by the older students. Younger students will work on the more abstract end of the mural," Bridge said.

Teachers truly care The project will be created with glass tile, mortar and grout donated by manufacturer Crossville Tile and Kate-Lo Tile and Stone of Urbandale. The mural design was unveiled recently at the school carnival with prints of the project available for purchase. But the idea of being a part of a landmark is special for one former student. Joe Turner, 31, who attended Western Hill as a child, will join its teaching staff in the fall.

"I remember it was a great place that always made you feel comfortable. Teachers weren't just vested in you for the year they had you in their classroom, they were interested in your success from classroom to classroom, they truly cared," Turner said. Tiles that surround the mural can be personalized and added to the mural for a \$25 donation. Proceeds from the sale of the donor tiles will be used to help pay for the mural project and for additional PTA donations to the school remodeling project.

Already, memorial tiles with the names of former principals, deceased teachers and students are being purchased. Turner said he, like many alumni and current students, may just add their family name to be an endearing part of the future of the school. Renovations at the school included adding windows to some classrooms, new lockers throughout the building, updating electrical work and infusing a splash of color to the flooring with vibrant tile work.

Western Hills Principal Beth Thornton said construction is ahead of schedule and teachers will begin moving in right after the last day of school. The completed mural will be installed over the summer and the school will host an open house for students and the community in July to celebrate new beginnings.

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