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For Immediate Release

November 10, 2010

Art Gets New Life: Washington Elementary School Kids' Art Moved to Creekside, University Hills Schools

Boulder, CO – Artworks created by students at the former Washington Elementary School have found new homes. Creekside Elementary School and University Hill Elementary School – both in Boulder Valley School District – will display the painted murals, ceramic tiles and other student work created in the 1990s.

Washington Elementary School, the first dual-language immersion school in the Boulder Valley School District, is now being transformed into the Washington Village cohousing community. When Wonderland Hill Development Company purchased the former school site in April 2008, it committed to saving the rich student art displayed throughout the school and its surrounding campus. “When you walked into the school, the first thing you’d see was the kids’ art,” says Steven Toot, Wonderland Hill vice president. “People in the community wanted to preserve it.”

Ceramic artist Abby Silver of Silver Ceramic Designs was commissioned to clean, evaluate, and preserve all of the art pieces Washington Elementary School students had created. “The pieces were in incredibly good shape,” says Silver, who had to remove many of the pieces from their original mountings so that they could be moved to new locations. Other local Boulder artists also helped to evaluate the artwork. All agreed that the art was a true “community asset,” says Jim Leach, Wonderland Hill founder.

The art was created as part of a 1990s artist-in-residency program at the Washington Elementary School. Artists would create their own art in the morning so that students could see how artists worked. In the afternoons, the artists would work with the children on their collective art project. “It was definitely a lively art scene,” says Silver. Mixed media artist Elisa Love, then a parent of two of the school’s students and now a teacher at Creekside Elementary School, was the school’s first artist-in-residence and recalls that “there were lots of people in and out of the school. It attracted top-name artists.”

“There was a vision behind this [the art],” says Silver. “There was both an underlying thematic and artistic consistency running throughout a lot of the work.” Leach agrees, noting that there is “real significance” to the art. “It demonstrates teaching and learning experiences that go beyond the kids’ art,” with a special emphasis on the multicultural aspects of Washington Elementary School.

While some selected artwork will remain as part of the Washington Village cohousing community being built at the school site, the bulk of the art has been moved to two Boulder elementary schools. Silver worked with the schools to deliver the art correctly and to ensure that it is carefully preserved.

Creekside Elementary School, 3740 Martin Drive, now displays three large multi-panel murals, with a total of ten 4' x 8' panels. Love is thrilled that the art is being preserved. Not only did the Washington Elementary Students get the experience of creating the art, but the Creekside students now get to enjoy the results. The Creekside students, Love says, "are so happy" going by the artwork and love interacting with it. They become "part of the dance" of the murals' images, she says.

The rest of the art will reside at University Hill Elementary School, 956 16th Street, a bilingual school that carries the legacy of the Washington School's dual-language program. One piece – the "storybook mural" – stands 12 feet tall and 16 feet wide. A combination of painted ceramic and painted wood, the mural illustrates books the children were reading at the time they created the mural. "At the bottom," says Silver, "there are kids reading, and then there are characters flying out of the books."

Working with this art, says Silver, has been "rewarding, fun and stimulating. There is such freedom and creativity in children's artwork."

Perhaps most gratifying has been the community's response to this body of art. "The work's been embraced by the community," says Silver. When Wonderland Hill Development Company held an open house so that community members could view the art, some of the original artists – the former Washington School students – came out to see the art, as did many of their parents. "There was still so much connection," says Silver, adding that it is "nice to know that the art will be integrated" into other Boulder elementary schools. "I hope that the art continues to be appreciated," adds Toot. "I hope it gets re-viewed on a much bigger scale. We're grateful that there is a place for the art to go where it will be truly appreciated."

The next chapter of Washington Elementary School will be as a cohousing community in the heart of Boulder. Incorporating the historic Washington Elementary School as its centerpiece, the welcoming park-like campus will feature 33 warm and inviting private residences as well as shared common facilities. The children's artwork that remains will be displayed in the common areas and will become, Leach predicts, an "important part of the community." The art will be a way, he says, to "tie the past with what we're doing in the future. The art will add to the aesthetic quality of Washington Village."

The first phase of the Washington Village project will include renovating the historic school building into seven high-quality living units plus over 6,000 square feet of common area for the use of community members. The community is now pre-selling. For more information, visit www.washington-village.com.

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