

School Mural Reflects Cultural Exchange

By Heather Zimar

In June, the Belle Sherman Elementary School community revealed a hand-painted mural designed to honor the influence of the Haudenosaunee (also called Iroquois or People of the Longhouse) in New York State.

Displayed near the school's front entrance, the mural culminated a year-long social studies project funded by two integrated Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) Teacher Grants awarded to fourth-grade teachers Tara Ciatoli, Nancy Thompson and Joseph Volpe.

"At the 'reveal' school assembly, very young children to adults sat spellbound for a long time, listening to the beautiful words of these leaders," said Randi Beckman, Belle Sherman first grade teacher, who attended the event hosted by the Belle Sherman fourth grade and Haudenosaunee community members. "Somehow everyone felt that a special and important day this was."

Over the course of several months, 66 fourth-graders learned about Native American culture in New York State and the influence of the Haudenosaunee on the formation of the U.S. government by listening to oral presentations by Haudenosaunee people themselves. Speakers included Bernadette Hill (Heron Clan Mother), Karl Hill (Heron Clan, Faithkeeper and Sub-Chief), Donna Silversmith (Snipe Clan Archeologist) and Dan Hill (Heron Clan, Cayuga SHARE Farm Caretaker and Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force).

Students also corresponded,

through letters, blogging, Skype and e-mail, with Haudenosaunee children of the Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario, Canada, and the Onondaga Nation School in Nedrow. Part of the IPEI funding included field trips to Cayuga SHARE (Strengthening Haudenosaunee American Relations through Education) and Ganondagan, a historic Iroquois village in Victor.

These experiences inspired students to design and sketch pieces of art which were later incorporated into the larger mural. School staff, families and community members joined the Haudenosaunee people to celebrate the reveal of the mural with a dinner, speeches and musical performances. Many Haudenosaunee people spoke, including Sam George (Bear Clan and Chief of Cayuga Haudenosaunee).

As family and community members examined the mural, student groups lined the hallways, sharing their parts in the project.

"The children held close-up color prints of the images they painted on the mural, eager to explain the meaning of the images to our guests," Thompson said. "Images included Skywoman, the First Strawberries (formed by individual fingerprints of every child), animal images symbolic of the Haudenosaunee Clan System, the Finger Lakes, and the Hiawatha Belt."

"The 'Voice of the Haudenosaunee' project allowed fourth-graders to engage in hands-on activities, such as painting the mural, planting corn, beans and squash at the Cayuga SHARE



Photo provided

Students at Belle Sherman Elementary School spent months learning about Native American Culture while creating a school mural.

Farm, and listening to the amazing stories of contemporary Haudenosaunee," Thompson added. "Even more important, the mural, our website, and the relationships we established will help us enrich the curriculum and preserve a snapshot of Haudenosaunee culture for future students."

The students have blogged and tweeted about what they've learned on the fourth-grade class blog (www.belleshermanfourthgrade.com/haudenosaunee-project.html), and presentations have been recorded and preserved for the community and ongoing learning.

IPEI Teacher Grants are awards to Ithaca City School District (ICSD) teachers for innovative projects that bring community mem-

bers into active participation in the classroom. For more information, see www.ipei.org.

Gardening Event

A Climate Change and Gardening workshop will be held Wednesday, July 30, from 6:30-8:30 p.m. at the Tompkins County Cornell Cooperative Extension Education Center, 615 Willow Ave. in Ithaca. The fee is \$5 to \$10 on a self-determined sliding scale and pre-registration is requested.

This workshop will offer a discussion on how gardeners can adapt by selecting different plants or varieties, and by devising means to deliver water. Call 272-2292 for more information or registration.

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