

New Murals Support The Work Of Speech Pathologists

Dylan Klempler

STanding near one of two colorful new murals at the Jacksonville Speech and Hearing Center, Director Bill McQuilkin, Jr. Points down an adjacent hallway: “The children go right down [there],” he says. “They’re always seeing both of them.”

Located near the Center’s front entrance, the mural was conceived and painted by Phillip Cozma. It depicts young children of many races and abilities enthusiastically playing in a park-like setting. They run, ride a bicycle, and swing on a swing set. Big trees and a big sky surround them. The colors are bright and cheerful and include shades of orange, yellow, red, green, blue.

Yvonne Lozano designed and painted the Center’s other large wall mural, situated just down the corridor and around the corner from Cozma’s. Her painting, though different in style, also uses bright colors and playful imagery. It portrays children enjoying a day at the beach and incorporates the distinctive characteristics for which she has become known: flat surfaces, layers of bright colors, black outlining, and faceless, though endearing subjects.

Installing the murals at the Center was McQuilkin’s idea. He says he wanted to incorporate images from nature into the building’s interior design, to “bring the outside in.” He also wanted the imagery to be “child-centric.” He hoped the murals would appeal to children aged one to five who are the Center’s primary focus.

According to McQuilkin, there are thousands of children in the Northeast Florida community who need speech-language help. And the most formative time for language development is in the first few years of life.

Since 1949, the Speech and Hearing Center has filled a gap in the Northeast Florida community by offering one of the few programs of its kind for young children with speech and hearing impairments. Most of the clients McQuilkin’s organization serve also come from low-income families.

“We provide very professional, compassionate care to all individuals that suffer from speech, hearing and language problems in this region,” explains McQuilkin. “And that involves children, adults...all ages.”

The Center’s services are unique in several ways: Clinicians work one-on-one with a child and his or her parent, unlike in public schools where most children needing special help are dealt with in groups. They also accept Medicaid insurance plans and provide sliding fee schedules for people who are eligible based on federal poverty guidelines.

For adults, the Center offers hearing screenings that can lead to a custom hearing-aid fitting. When speaking about his adult services, McQuilkin is quick to mention his organization’s not-for-profit status. In contrast to some retail hearing centers, his clients “know that they’re not going to be sold something that’s inappropriate for them,” he says.

Parents are another adult population McQuilkin’s organization serves. “We are almost just as concerned with working with the parents,” he notes, adding that language skills learned by children at the Center need to be carried on by parents in the home to be effective.

When McQuilkin first thought of engaging the children and parents he works with by incorporating large-scale artwork at the Speech and Hearing Center, he contacted Jacksonville’s The Art Center Cooperative, Inc. “I wanted to work with local artists,” he says.

The Art Center Cooperative’s Annelies Dykgraaf recalls that she and two other board members first met with McQuilkin in December, 2009. After discussing the Project and seeing the space, they decided to take the project on. Cozma and Lozano, both Cooperative members at the time, undertook the murals’ design and creation. Marsha Hatcher, also a member, assisted them.

Dykgraaf explains that all of the artists at the Cooperative are volunteers, and most also have full time jobs. A mission they are passionate about is “working in the community to promote and support a creative spirit.”

According to McQuilkin, installing the murals in his facility represents his philosophy of incorporating art into the

workplace. He believes that art is an important part of the healing process at the Speech and Hearing Center, and directly relates to their mission of helping children get ready for school. He says it makes working with children a happier and more relaxed process.

Art also provides the stimulus needed for children to practice verbal skills.

Speech-Language Pathologist Sharon Kesler feels that the murals have turned out to be very helpful. In her work at the Center, Kesler uses the mural images to get the children's attention and encourage language use. "We do whatever we can to have the children look at these pictures and use them to learn language."

When helping children express action, for example, Kesler will often point to images found in Cozma's mural and say, "This person is riding a bike." She hopes that when the child sees a bicycle outside the Center, he or she will remember the image and use their language skills to name it.

Meanwhile, Kesler says the children are interacting with the murals on their own. Since the murals are conspicuously placed, children usually pass them on their way to see their therapist. Lozano's beach scene, for example, is directly across the hallway from Kesler's office. The speech pathologist said that she often hears children commenting on what they see in the painting: "'This one is swimming' or 'I see a boat.'"

Cozma says that he thought about what the children might want to see on the walls after he learned about their challenges from McQuilkin. "What might bring them joy?" he asked himself. He hoped his painting "would give them a sense of comfort."

Cozma also hoped that the children might be able to relate to the images they saw in positive ways. He depicts one child in a wheelchair. But instead of highlighting his, or any of the other children's limitations, Cozma portrays excited participants in the colorful scene. One whimsical image—a favorite among visitors to the Center, according to McQuilkin—shows a child floating above the ground suspended by balloons. According to the artist, his primary goal was to create an "inspirational visual message of what they could do."

Lozano, who designed and painted the beach scene mural, says she hoped to help children who come to the Center "find their happy place." In part, the artist looked to her own experiences for inspiration. Lozano has had poor vision for most of her life, "I've worn Coke-bottle glasses since I was four, so I know a little bit of what it's like to have an impairment that you can't hide." Her limited vision has been especially challenging to deal with as an artist, but has given her a "soft spot in my heart for kids who are born with these struggles that other kids don't have to deal with."

She notes that Kesler encouraged her to show things in the painting that can be touched...like water, sand, and other items children might like to interact with. She chose a beach scene because she thought it would be fun and something children living in Florida could relate to.

Both McQuilkin and Kesler emphasize the importance of fun as a stimulus for teaching language skills to children. "Playtime is very important," says the Center's director. "Our therapists use play." The more stimuli a child can get in those early years, the better, he asserts. "Some children have a deficit of stimuli. We try to reverse that."

Jacksonville Speech and Hearing Center, 1128 North Laura Street, 355-3403..or <http://shcjax.org/>

The Art Center Cooperative, Inc. (TAC), 31 W. Adams St. (Main location in the Carling), and 229 N. Hogan St. both locations Downtown Jacksonville.
www.tacjacksonville.org.

Artists: Yvonne Lozano, <http://yclart.com/> and Philip Cozma, <http://philipcozma.com>

[VIEW ALL ARTICLES](#)