

I was approached by the PTA in September 2017 to create a school-wide painted rock project about kindness. After researching the process and materials it would take to create such a project, I decided I didn't know enough and would need a mason to help me install it. We couldn't find anyone that would be willing to assist me, so I suggested a material I was more familiar with—tiles.

The kindness team suggested I attend their next meeting to talk about the materials and design for the project, and consequently this was the day I was unknowingly inducted into the kindness committee. Fifth grade teacher, Renee Grenier, found a picture on the internet that she thought would deliver our kindness message well—two hands touching one another creating the shape of a heart within the negative space. I loved it and immediately got to work compiling a list of needed materials and priced them out. Anna Wood assured me that the PTA would finance the project; however, I wanted to find ways to keep the cost as low as possible. The breakdown for the project ended up being as follows:



Glaze	\$ 150.00	PTA
Tiles	\$ 300.00	Lima Tile & Marble
Mastic	\$ 20.00	New England Tile
Grout	\$ 30.00	New England Tile
Tile Spacers	\$ 15.00	New England Tile
Wood Putty	\$ 5.00	PTA
Sandpaper	\$ 5.00	PTA
Wood	\$ 30.00	PTA
Stain/polyurethane	\$ 10.00	PTA
Sponges/bucket/gloves	\$ 15.00	Diego Arredondo
Tile holders	\$ 60.00	Loaned by Burr Elementary School
Trowel/grout float	\$ 15.00	Amy Gorruso
Labor/installation of tiles	\$ 1,000.00	Amy Gorruso & Diego Arredondo
Labor/installation of wood frame	\$ 200.00	Josh Gorruso
Projected Cost of Mural	\$ 1,855.00	
Actual Cost	\$200	

I wanted to keep the cost down as much as possible, so during my prep period, I drove to several tiling stores in the area to see if they would be willing to donate supplies for our project. I went to New England Tile and Marble in Fairfield and they agreed to donate the mastic, grout, and spacers for the project. Lima Tile – Fairfield County Tile & Marble in Bridgeport donated 700 4" tiles. The PTA purchased the glazes, wood putty, sand paper, stain, and polyurethane. My husband agreed to install, putty, sand, stain, and polyurethane the frame for the mural. One of my co-workers at Burr Elementary school agreed to loan McKinley her tile holders so that we would not have to purchase them. My husband agreed to install the frame and our custodian Diego Arredondo installed and grouted the mural with me. The entire project should have cost

roughly \$2000, however, with donations and volunteers, I'm happy to say the entire project cost the PTA \$200.

Unfortunately right before I was set to begin working on the mural, I found out I needed to have my right rotator cuff surgically repaired in January and would be out on medical leave for at least 6 weeks. I was not sure if I was going to be able to follow through with my promises to deliver a mural this year, but with the help of volunteers acting as my "hands", I came back to school March 1st and the mural was still set to go.

To begin, we laid all 540 tiles on the art room floor, 17 tiles tall (8 feet) by 32 tiles wide (12 feet). Once they were laid out, we labeled the back of them with an underglaze pencil, 1A, 1B, 1C, etc... all the way to 32Q. Then we flipped them all over so the front of the tile was facing up. With a regular writing pencil, I drew the hand design across all of the tiles with my left arm (since my right arm was in a foam sling.) Once the design was drawn, the PTA helped me label each individual tile with a "W" for white, "C" for color, or "B" for both color and white. Once they were all labeled, we sorted the tiles into "C", "W", and "B" boxes.

Next, I imported a list of all McKinley students and teachers names into an excel sheet to create a way to record names and numbers/letters. To organize the glazes, I went to the dollar store and bought several ice cube trays with lids as a way to keep the glazes moist during the 3 week process. When the glaze order came in, I realized that there were not enough options for students that had the white tiles, so I tested and mixed different tints of white glaze to create "cotton candy", "mint", "butter cream" and "sparkling peach". Finally we were ready to paint.

I limited the students color pallet in order to ensure proper color placement within the mural. Children either received a "W" tile which allowed them to use any of the white glaze colors, a "C" tile which allowed them to use any of the colorful colors, or a "B" which had sections of both white and colors. I reserved the "B" tiles for more advanced students and adults to ensure a successful tile coloring job. The coloring directions were for students to use their fingers to make dots on the tile—some chose to do so in a pattern, others chose a more abstract design. We spent a total of about 2 ½ weeks glazing the tiles which took about 12 kiln loads.

At this time, my shoulder was still not healed and lifting 20 pound tile-holders in and out of the kiln was a daunting task for me. Luckily it was around this time that I received an email from an AP art student named Olivia Groell who was looking for 10 community service hours. I immediately put her to work helping me with the kindness mural. Olivia would load the kiln in afternoon and I would unload it in the morning. I had to keep the tiles organized after they were unloaded from the kiln to make installation a much smoother process, so I emptied out copy paper box lids and labeled them with "A", "B", "C", etc. and emptied the completed tiles into the correct boxes. Once I had hunted down all McKinley community members, I found I had 10 tiles left over, so I had the PTA president choose some well-deserved parent volunteers to complete the 540-person mural.

Because the mural required there to be headers A-Q and 1-32 along the top, bottom, and sides, I spent that weekend using my husband's tile saw quartering 25 tiles and then decorating 98 of them with a "Cooper Black" font style with a funky design which took me approximately 10 hours. Olivia's last community service hours were spent helping me lay the mural on the art room floor again in a sort of "dress rehearsal" to make sure there wouldn't be any surprises the day of the hanging. I'm very glad we did this because there were several tiles that needed to be flip-flopped and changed within the design.

By this time, the work order I put in to have the town remove the bulletin board and repair the wall space was completed. Diego and I picked a day to install the mural—of course it was the hottest 90+ degree day of the year the day before the air conditioning was turned on. It took Diego and I from 2:30-8:00pm to finish hanging the tiles. The following week, we grouted it which took 6 hours to complete and then it took my husband Josh Gorruso about 2 ½ hours to frame, putty, sand, stain, and polyurethane it. We covered the mural with trash bags so that there would be an “unveiling” at the annual art show on May 18th, 2018.

To get ready for the show, I alphabetized everyone by last name and printed, framed, and mounted the names to the wall next to the mural so that everyone would be able to find their tile easily. All people’s names were in alphabetical order by last name with a letter and a number next to it. (i.e. Amy Gorruso, L21) This is the actual tile I decorated and I can find it by looking in column “L”, and row “21” and seeing where they intersect.

Kindness movement sweeps McKinley school

By Justin Papp Published 12:00 am, Tuesday, May 29, 2018

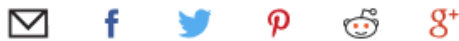


Photo: Justin Papp

The Knidness Mural displayed at McKinley Elementary School, May 23, 2018, Fairfield, Conn.