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GOODWILL BLIMP

Children's Hospital patients paint panels for airship.

By LOUIS GALVAN
THE FRESNO BEE

Five-year-old Alberto Diaz Jr. of Merced, battling cancer, spoke little as he helped paint the largest blimp in the world.

"He's not shy," said the boy's father, Alberto Diaz Sr. "It just takes him a little time to feel comfortable with strangers."

Alberto was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a form of bone and tissue cancer, on Labor Day. He is being treated at Children's Hospital Central California in Madera County. He was among about 20 patients who got a chance Tuesday to participate in the painting project sponsored by Southern California-based Portraits of Hope and the Ameriquest Mortgage Co.

Part of the Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Program, the painting project, which started in August, is being hailed as a first-of-its-kind effort that will involve 6,000 children from Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. They will paint 40,000 square feet of material that will be affixed to the Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Airship, the largest blimp in the world, according to Susan Nassberg, a spokeswoman for Portraits of Hope.

Once completed, the airship is expected to be unveiled in March and will travel throughout the country to major sporting events and other functions.

"We are also planning to bring it here to Children's Hospital so that all the kids in the area who participated in the painting will get Please see PAINTING, Page B7



KURT HEGRE — THE FRESNO BEE

Adrienne Trigueros, 3, decorates a model of a blimp Tuesday at Children's Hospital Central California for a project that will display artwork on the world's largest blimp.



KURT HEGRE — THE FRESNO BEE

Patients and volunteers at Children's Hospital Central California in Madera County paint a mural Tuesday. The patients joined a painting project in which a blimp will display artwork from an estimated 6,000 children.

Painting: Session set in Fresno today

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a chance to see it," Nassberg said.

Painting sessions consist of decorating large panels of a special material. Organizers collect the panels after each session, and the panels are shipped to another location for further preparation.

So far, painting sessions have been conducted in Dallas and Arlington, Texas, and in Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose, Los Angeles and San Diego.

Another session is scheduled today from 3-5 p.m. at the Boys and Girls Club in Fresno on North Augusta Avenue, and other sessions will be held in Bakersfield before winding up in New Mexico and Arizona.

Children taking part in the project are being chosen from after-school programs, youth organizations and pediatric care facilities. Children's Hospi-

tal is the only hospital in California that has been chosen for the project.

The project is expected to require as many as 1,000 paintbrushes and about 450 gallons of paint and top coat.

Portraits of Hope was founded in 1995 by brothers Ed and Bernie Massey for seriously ill and physically disabled children, but it has been expanded to include a wide

array of children and adults, Nassberg said.

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