



**Sunny to
partly cloudy**
High **84°**
Low **53°**
Weather, C8

The Record

Stockton San Joaquin Mother Lode

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46¢
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Record photos by MICHAEL McCOLLUM

PROJECT HOPE: Nate Phelps, 6, and mom Suzanne help paint a large mural Thursday in St. Joseph's hospital's pediatrics unit. Their panel will join others to transform an oil-rig tower in Beverly Hills into a monument to ill children.

Kids give sickness the brushoff

World's largest mural a tribute to children battling health woes

By Neil Gonzales
Record Staff Writer

Sick youngsters at St. Joseph's Medical Center in Stockton brushed away their problems for a while Thursday afternoon.

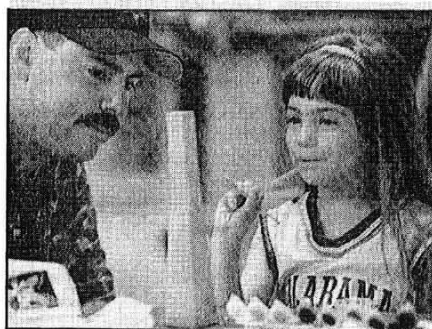
Several children, their relatives and hospital staff picked up paint brushes and laid colorful strokes onto a large mural panel placed on the floor of the pediatrics unit.

The panel — No. 17 — will join other pieces to transform a 165-foot oil-rig tower in Beverly Hills into a tribute to the spirit of children battling cancer, AIDS and other illnesses.

The statewide endeavor dubbed Project 9865 was launched last year as a large-scale creative therapy program for pediatric patients and their families.

"It's pretty cool," said Alfredo Murrieta, 15, of Stockton, who got down on his belly to paint. "We're, like, making history right now, painting a piece of the tower."

Project co-founder Ed Massey, a Los



Angeles artist and author of children's books, said the effort is the world's largest public artwork. He said that by the end of the year, it will make over a bland, 20-year-old tower that is 13 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty.

Massey also said it will be the biggest monument in the Western United States and will have 100 floral panels in all.

Each side of the tower will represent a season, he said. Participants from St. Joseph's were working on a spring panel.

TOWER POWER:
Four-year-old Hannah Brunelli of Lodi and her dad, Nick, paint a model Thursday of the planned mural project, which will include the work of 40,000 children and 10,000 adults.

Earlier Thursday, young patients at San Joaquin General Hospital painted a panel.

Four years ago, Massey and his brother, Bernie, director of the Center for American Studies and Culture in Los Angeles, conceived the project, named after the oil rig's address, 9865 Olympic Blvd. in Beverly Hills. An estimated 25 million motorists per year will pass the towering mural.

In the end, Massey said, 40,000 children and 10,000 adults will have con-

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KIDS

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tributed to the project, which is drawing more than \$1 million in donations from corporate sponsors, individuals and others.

"It gives them time to forget about the pain medication, the surgery coming up or the chronic illness," Massey said.

Cindy Thomas, director of women's services at St. Joseph's, said the children develop a sense of accomplishment by participating in the project.

The project also bonds kids with others facing the same kinds of challenges, she added.

Murrieta, who goes to St. Joseph's every month to get treatment for juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, said working on the panel helps young people such as him "relax more" and "take their

mind off what they have."

Nate Phelps, a 6-year-old Stockton boy who had surgery for a ruptured appendix, was also enjoying work on the mural. "I like it," he said as he sat on a small chair and stroked on pink paint with a long brush.

Nick Brunelli, 32, of Lodi and

his 4-year-old daughter, Hannah, were busy at another side of the panel.

"It's nice (the kids) get an opportunity to do something that's fun and not normally what they do here," said Brunelli, whose daughter gets treated twice a

week at St. Joseph's for an enzyme condition. "It's more playful."

At the heart of the grand enterprise is the simple idea of bringing children, families and hospital employees together for a fun activity in a place usually associated with distress.