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Paint project colors lives of child patients

By James Vallejos
STAFF WRITER

WHITTIER — It was hard to tell who enjoyed painting the flower more, Adam Acosta or his mother, Amanda. Both had smiles that spread across their faces.

Adam, 5, of Whittier, was one of about 15 children and their families invited to participate in a creative therapy program called Project 9865 at the Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital in Whittier on Monday.

Part of a larger program called Portraits of Hope, the project involves children from every pediatric unit in California. They have been painting individual polyvinyl panels of varying sizes that will eventually be used to cover a 165-foot oil tower in Beverly Hills.

When the 15,000-square-foot project is finished, it will be the largest monument in the western United States, larger than the Statue of Liberty, with three times the painting surface of the Sistine Chapel, said Ed Massey, co-creator of the project.

The panels on the four sides of the tower will each represent a different season, with flowers and colors from each time of the year.

Massey said he chose flowers as the theme because of what they represent.

"The flower is the universal symbol of life, hope and beauty," he said. "It's an important part of the project."

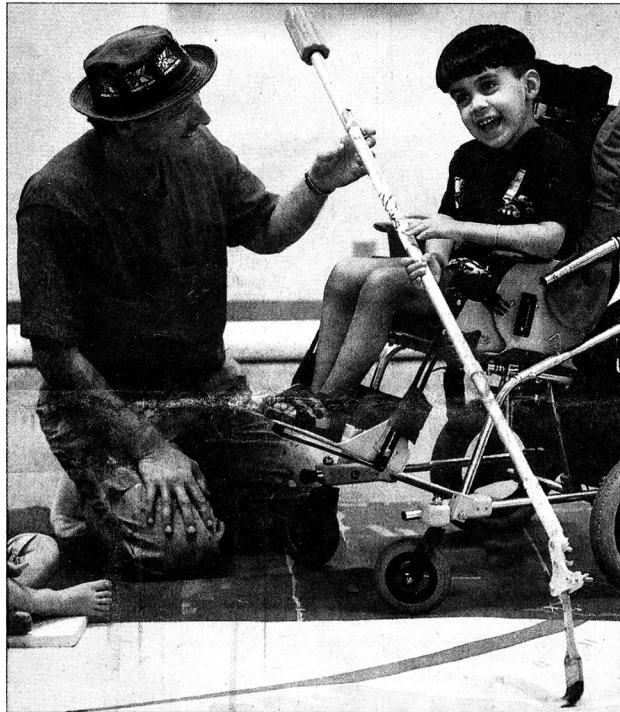
Amanda Acosta said she is grateful her son was asked to join in.

"When we got the letter it really meant a lot to us and it was really emotional for me and my husband because (Adam) has a terminal disease," she said. "Part of him will permanently be on that tower."

Adam suffers from Alexander's disease, which affects the brain. There are only 61 documented cases and no known cure.

The project was named for the address of the tower, 9865 Olympic Blvd., by Massey and his brother, Bernie. Ed Massey had seen the gray tower for years and wanted to add some color to the structure. He originally planned to have graduate students paint the tower until he learned it was covered by

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Staff photos by LEO JARZOMB

PROJECT 9865 COORDINATOR Ed Massey assists Adam Acosta, 5, in painting one of many panels that will cover a Beverly Hills oil tower.



WORKING ON A PANEL at Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital are, from left, Brandon Minasian, 10; Jasmine Shriver, 7; project volunteer Laura Nigro, 16; Jeremy Shriver, 13; and Nathaniel Shriver, 13.

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HOPE

Project to be done in January 2000

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removable panels.

An author of children's books who had read stories to children in pediatric hospitals and seen the positive effects, Massey, 36, thought it would be great if he could somehow get them involved in painting the panels.

After battling red tape for three years, he finally got permission to paint the 100 panels from the owner of the tower Venoco, and received all the permits he needed to complete the project from officials from Beverly Hills and Century City.

He has spent the last 18 months going from hospital to hospital, bringing with him the panels, the paint and all the tools necessary to complete the job.

"Many children have difficulty, physical challenges and they would never get the oppor-

When completed, 44,000 children, their families and volunteers will have worked on the project. All will have their names inscribed at the base of the tower.

tunity to get up 165 feet on a scaffold," he said. "This way we bring the panels to them and they can use this as an outlet for whatever it is they are going through."

The main goal is to enhance the quality of life for hospitalized children and their families, said Massey.

Liz Melgoza, a registered nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit and pediatric supervisor at the Whittier hospital, said Massey has made the project easy enough for all children to take part.

"They can handle various forms of handicaps, they've got the extension for the brushes and they have foot brushes," she said. "They're very prepared for any handicap or disability."

Raymond Rico, 13, of Whittier suffers from osteogene-

sis imperfecta, which makes his bones very brittle and easy to break. He's spent the last two summers in a body cast after suffering numerous breaks to his legs, but managed to make it through this summer unscathed.

After painting part of the 7-by-22-foot panel, Rico said he wants to be there when the tower is unveiled sometime in January.

"It's gonna look good," he said.

Becki Rico, Raymond's mother, said he has been admitted to the hospital at least eight times and that her son is glad to be back at the hospital, this time injury and pain free.

"He told me 'Mom, it feels good to walk in. I'm always coming in on a stretcher, it's great to be on my feet,'" she said.

Project 9865 is a nonprofit effort that has received many donations throughout the entire process. Massey said Delta Paints in Whittier has donated all of the paint and Massey Chevrolet (no relation) in Downey donated a Suburban to haul all of the materials needed for the project.

Once all of the painting is complete and the fiberglass coating has been applied, Dinwiddie Construction will provide the crane and manpower to place the panels back on the tower.

When completed, 44,000 children, their families and volunteers will have worked on the project. All will have their names inscribed at the base of the tower.

Adam Acosta and his family plan to attend the unveiling. Despite only being able to say a few words, the boy's mother said he is proud and can't wait to see the portion of the winter panel he contributed to.

"When we see it, I know what he's going to say," she said. "He'll say 'Look at that, I did it.'"