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Healing in a big way

By Wendy Thomas

The children arrive in bandages, braces and wheelchairs. Some are dragging IV poles behind them, others are weary from a day of medicinal injections. But all — whether suffering from broken bones, chronic asthma or AIDS — are escaping their hospital rooms for a few hours of creative therapy.

As part of a large-scale art project begun this year by two Westside brothers, hospitalized children across California are helping to paint a 15,000-square-foot mural in the comfort of their own children's wards. Using as canvases large panels that have been dismantled from a dormant oil tower in Beverly Hills, children of all ages are given brushes, paints and a 6- to 7-foot flower stencil with which to show their stuff. In broad strokes of rich color, they bring the stencils to life while letting their illnesses take a back seat for a while.

"We come with these very vibrant colors, and all these tarps," says Ed Massey, a 39-year-old sculptor and children's book author who

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Brothers Ed and Bernie Massey flank an Olympic Boulevard oil tower being used in an art project for hospitalized children.

Photo by Gary McCarthy

Landmark

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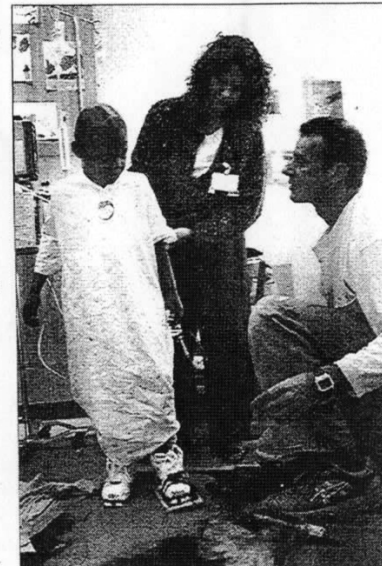
is organizing the project with his younger brother, Bernie. "It's a very fun, active participatory activity."

Eventually, when all the panels have been transformed, they will be reinstalled onto the oil tower to form what the Masseys dub "the largest landmark in the Western United States." Called Project 9865 — for the tower's address, 9865 Olympic Blvd. — the tower's four sides will represent different seasons; and a plaque at its base will accommodate the names of every child involved, as well as volunteers, participating companies and benefactors.

"I can't tell you how many parents have come up to us and hugged us," Ed Massey says of the hospital visits he's made so far for Project 9865. "It's so uplifting... You come out of there glowing because you've just given these kids such a wonderful day."

Although each individual child sees only one section of the entire art piece, Ed Massey says he does his best to give them a conceptual idea of the final product. Each child is given a drawing showing them where their flower will appear on the landmark, as well as a new set of paints and their own wooden model of the tower to decorate themselves.

Project 9865, which has the support of hundreds of individuals, organizations, companies and government officials, is part of Portraits of Hope, an art therapy program for two of society's most isolated populations: hospitalized children and the elderly.



A cancer patient tries out a "shoe brush" fashioned by the Masseys for kids who cannot use their hands.

Directed by Ed Massey, Portraits of Hope is driven by the Center for American Studies and Culture, whose founder and national executive director is Bernie Massey.

The Masseys, a socially conscious pair who work out of a Project 9865 office donated to them by Westside Pavilion, are not only inviting

sick children to participate in the project. By bringing in roughly 20,000 healthy students, scouts and campers to paint the base coats on the panels before hand-delivering the sections to hospitals, the brothers can educate kids about their ailing counterparts and bring a heightened sense of awareness to their ultimate

Photo by Robin Yeager

CAUSE.

Some of their volunteers are former patients, as well. Phyllis Ann Coblenz, a 34-year-old lymphoma cancer survivor, has been working with Project 9865 since August. She says going to Dream Street, a camp for kids with cancer, to help them paint the panels is her way of "giving something back."

"It makes them so happy to be a part of something," she says of the children, adding: "Everybody shrugs their shoulders...but what you do in life really does make a difference." The Masseys have yet to be turned down by a pediatrics hospital or oncology unit in the entire state, and they plan to include every single child and that child's support network — friends and family who happen to be visiting at the time — in the project.

And donations have been pouring in. Venoco Inc., owner of the oil tower, is allowing the rehab free of charge; Dinwiddie Construction, the company that built the Getty Center, has agreed to install the panels; Westside Pavilion is providing outreach to the community; Delta Technical Coatings gave the paints and paint brushes; and large corporations, like the Omaha-based ConAgra, have provided financial backing.

And for children who cannot use their hands to paint, the Masseys have patented a shoe brush with Nike. Adhered to the bottom of a shoe, the paint brush allows children to step into the paint and then onto the panels, which are laid on the ground for easy access.

"It's like a shoe dance," Ed Massey says. "It's incredible."