

Evanston RoundTable

Oakton School WPA Mural Is Restored

By Chris Cascarano

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During the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt started the Works Progress Administration to employ millions of out-of-work Americans for civic improvements. In Evanston, artists were hired to create works for the public schools. Some of these works have stood up well to the test of time; others began to decay and were destroyed.

One piece, a mural at Oakton School titled "Knights and Damsels," was very close to being scraped off the wall and painted white. "People were getting a bad impression of the school from the decaying mural," said Mark Cleveland, a former member of Oakton's PTA.

Driven to bring a clean look back to Oakton's auditorium and reluctant to destroy the mural, Mr. Cleveland, joined by a team of community members, began to "knock on a lot of doors" seeking help. On March 23 the restored mural was unveiled, 13 years after the project began.

"There are more than paintings in these rooms," said Mr. Cleveland. "We wanted to send the message [with the rehabbed auditorium] that the kids here are important."

Painted in 1936, "Knights and Damsels" is a fresco-style painting depicting four stories of the French King Charlemagne and his noble knight Roland. Four panels, each from a different story, surround the gym, and between them are portraits of different characters.

It is still unknown who painted the mural. It is commonly believed that the works were painted by Chicago native Carl Scheffler but there is no evidence, said Heather Becker, CEO of the Chicago Conservation Center. "There is a lot of misinformation out there."

In the mid '90s the mural's colors were noticeably fading and plaster had begun flaking off the walls. Mr. Cleveland and the PTA felt the decaying mural represented the school poorly and might scare away families of prospective students. They sought advice.

The Chicago Conservation Center, which has restored over 400 murals in Chicago public schools, came to evaluate "Knights and Damsels." Conservators found "usual decay" and estimated restorations, including structural repairs, to cost \$130 thousand. Unable to draw funding from District 65, the restoration was put on hold and conservators traced the mural onto paper for documentation.

Still determined to repair the school auditorium, the Oakton PTA decided to raising the funds independently, and began writing letters to legislators and searching for donations.

In 1997 they received sponsorship from the Cigna insurance company and other corporate donors to restore one section. "We did the one section so we could show what the rest could look like," said Mr. Cleveland. Still District 65 was unable to produce funding.

Meanwhile roof leaks accelerated the mural's deterioration. Water seeping onto the wall caused more structural damage and caused large pieces of the wall to come off. Nearly half of some the murals disappeared.

In 2000 school administrators and PTA members began to bring legislators to the school to view the rapidly deteriorating condition of the artwork. State Rep. Julie Hamos committed to the project as a legislative sponsor after seeing them.

"The parents brought me out there; they told me I had to be on-site to see it," said Rep. Hamos. "When I saw this beautiful piece of history crumbling, I knew I had to help." She began working to set aside funding from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity funds.

In 2003 Superintendent Hardy Murphy received a call from Rep. Hamos. "Rep. Hamos called me while I was driving and said, 'How much do you need for the murals? I think I can get it,'" said Mr. Murphy. Rep. Hamos reserved the funds, and although the grant was \$30 thousand short, the Chicago Conservation Center decided to take on the project.

"We discounted our original proposal because we had been dedicated to the project for nearly 12 years and really wanted to see it finished," said Bailey O'Connell, of the Chicago Conservation Center. Slated for restoration, the project hit yet another setback. Although Rep. Hamos had reserved the grant money they still needed the governor's approval, and "when the governor changed, the grants just kept getting passed over," said Rep. Hamos.

Tenacious as ever, the Evanston community joined together to get the funds approved. Mayor Morton, school administrators and Oakton school parents wrote letters to the Governor. One frustrated woman, Nancy Flannery, decided to seek answers in person.

Ms. Flannery was awarded the Evanston Cultural Fund grant in 2003 to video-document the restoration of "Knights and Damsels." When the restoration's funding continued to be denied, Ms. Flannery sought answers.

"I just got frustrated when the money would come before the governor and he would veto it," said Ms. Flannery. "I decided to just go down there to Springfield and ask where our money was."

Despite her efforts, Ms. Flannery's trip to the capitol was fruitless. "It was a lot of politics," said Ms. Flannery. "I was usually just passed from office to office." In 2005 her documentary was abandoned when funds appeared unlikely to materialize.

Rep. Hamos stayed with the project and on May 10, 2006 the state approved the grant. "District 65 has so many competing needs it took a push from the outside," said Rep. Hamos. "I had to cut a lot of deals," she said. "In Springfield, that's what it takes."

Returning to the mural, conservators found the mural in a nearly irrecoverable state. Had they not traced the mural during their first visit, "Knights and Damsels" could not have been restored.

A section around the stage was found to be the oldest and in the gravest condition. As it was painted in tempera, a delicate water-based paint, it was more susceptible to environmental changes.

"If it's done well, it will last forever. Luckily, this was done well," said Margaret Nowosielska, chief mural conservator for the Chicago Conservation Center.

After repairing structural damages and fallen plaster, conservators sketched an outline from the tracings and began repainting the mural. "We had only half the mural left," said Ms. Nowosielska. "We had to reconstruct the other half."

Conservators spent six months matching colors by hand and replicating the original painter's technique to reconstruct the elaborate scenes of the mural. Finally, they applied a coat of varnish to protect the mural for years to come.

"I can barely tell which is my half," said Ms. Nowosielska.

Friday, March 23, a reception was held to unveil the finished mural. "It's amazing," said Mr. Cleveland. "I've always wondered what was going on in these murals; I can finally see what's happening now."

In restoring the mural, Rep. Hamos pointed out that something much greater had been accomplished.

"This was not only about the art and history, but community-building too," she said.

