

# The Fresno Bee



## 'Something to remember this year': Fresno students mark COVID experience with mural

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Manchester GATE Elementary School sixth-graders spent much of this school year and some of their fifth-grade year at home because of distance learning protocols due to the coronavirus.

So to commemorate the year spent apart, Fresno artist David Roberts was able to get students together in April to begin the process of creating a permanent ceramic mural of a tree. Located prominently on a wall outside the school's cafeteria, the mural will have the final touches completed just in time for sixth-grade promotion ceremonies on June 11.

"The purpose of the mural is to honor students' year spent in isolation," Roberts said of the project, which was funded by the Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District and Fresno Unified School District.

Roberts said he sees the mural as a legacy feature at the school where students can return years later to reflect on the challenges of 2020 and 2021.

Manchester GATE principal Janet Gengozian said the school needed to do something special for the kids who missed out on the usual extra activities like camp, field trips, sports and music events.

Roberts met with students in small groups outside classrooms after school so that they could



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Artist David Roberts stands near the ceramic mural of a valley oak tree he is installing at Manchester GATE Elementary School in Fresno to commemorate the school's 2020-2021 sixth-graders, at the school on Tuesday.

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A hawk made by artist David Roberts' son Jack Roberts, a student at Manchester GATE Elementary School, is shown in the bas-relief and mosaic ceramic mural David Roberts helped create with sixth-graders at the school.

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create their own porcelain-mix ceramic leaves with their names etched on them. Those leaves

were then fired and glazed before being attached to the tree branches by Roberts.

"For some students this was the first time they were able to see each other face-to-face," said Gengozian. "For a couple,

it was actually their first time on campus!"

The 10-foot by 10-foot tree mural was done partially in bas-relief, a sculptural technique with elements raised off of a mosaic tile background.

A valley oak tree was chosen as the image for the mural, Roberts said, as a tribute to the tree that is native to the San Joaquin Valley and historically plentiful before extensive agricultural clearing began in the late 1880s. Roberts' son Jack created a hawk to add to the image.

Students saw the project as a chance to do something good after a tough year.

"Everybody just really worked together," sixth-grader Keira Swain said. "Even though we were spaced away from each other, we still came together and we made something to remember this year."