

MUDDY BROOK CELEBRATES MUM BETT

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GREAT BARRINGTON — Visitors to Muddy Brook Elementary School always have a treat in store for themselves. After all, what could be more invigorating than watching second graders unlock the doors to the rest of their young lives?

But in the front hall of the small school is a mosaic dedicated to one of the most storied characters in Berkshire County history. With an assist from the rising third graders and others, project artist Daniel O'Dell of Sheffield has produced a mosaic honoring freed slave Elizabeth Freeman.

Freeman, also known as Mum Bett, was among the first black slaves in Massachusetts to file a "freedom suit" and win her case in the state's highest court, which ruled that slavery was illegal under the 1780 constitution.

Bett was a slave of Col. John Ashley, the wealthy land owner and attorney after whom the Ashley Falls section of Sheffield was named.

O'Dell worked with the children over the summer during Project Connection, an afterschool enrichment program and its summer counterpart, Camp Explorations. Also collaborating were Project Connection Coordinator Jack Cowles and Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant, director of Multicultural Bridge.

"Our vision is for our school to reflect our community and landscape," Muddy Brook Principal Mary Berle told *The Record*. "This project is the first representation of what will be art made with students to cultivate a sense of place throughout the school."

O'Dell is primarily a sculptor who also paints. This was his first mosaic. School officials initially proposed having first- and second-graders work on the project but O'Dell thought they would be a tad too young. O'Dell suggested third graders, in part because they were going to study Bett this year anyway.

O'Dell met before the camp started with Cowles, Van Sant, Berle and Joshua Briggs, director of teaching and learning for the Berkshire Hills Regional School District.

The first task in the process was to give the students a crash course on Bett and her significance.

"They live in the area, so it was easy for them to make a connection," O'Dell said of his young scholars. "Then I took over the design aspect with lots of input."

About 50 hours were put into the project, not counting his own time, O'Dell estimates. One of the most challenging aspects of the project was that the design had to be completed before the execution could begin. Unlike painting or even sculpture, the components of a mosaic (e.g. different colored tiles and adhesive) must be ordered ahead of time.

"It was very labor-intensive but the end result is worth it," O'Dell said "It will make a great addition to the place."

The result was quite powerful: Bett looking out over the land near what appears to be the Ashley House with both a storm cloud and a rainbow on the horizon — perhaps to signify both the tragedy she endured but the hope it inspired.

Written over the images are Bett's own words: "Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me ... I would have taken it."

"Over the next few years I expect to collaborate with the PTA and other community groups to develop additional projects like this one," Berle explained. "Ultimately we will walk through the school, see student-made art reflecting our area, scan the QR codes, and hear students telling the story behind the art and its relationship to our local history."

Berle said she was grateful for O'Dell's support, for the students who created the mosaic with him, and for Multicultural Bridge and Project Connection staff that supported students in understanding the story of Bett.

Berle says the project also connects to the district's developing work in oral storytelling led by actress Rebecca Honig and Briggs at Muddy Brook.

"This is also parallel to a larger community wide effort Beryl Jolly is leading at the Mahaiwe with her South County Stories Project," Berle added.

The mosaic joins other projects on campus designed to emphasize to students their connections to Berkshire County. A garden project designed by teachers Glenn Chamberlain and Amy Salinetti was completed last year in front of the school on Monument Valley Road. With a variety of vegetables and decorative plants, the new garden goes a long way toward reflecting the rural nature of Berkshire County.

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