

**CROSSING THE BRIDGE TO HOPE  
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**SCHOOL KIDS CREATE MURAL THAT HONORS DIVERSITY  
AND SGI PRESIDENT'S POEM**

The Tenderloin is one of San Francisco's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, notorious for drug dealing and crime. The newly built Tenderloin Community School sits on the safest edge of this area, two blocks from city hall. Traditionally a transient neighborhood with few children, schools were never built because there was no need. Over the past fifteen years or so, the demographics changed dramatically as it became a leading relocation spot for Southeast Asian families escaping more than two decades of war. The families built a sense of community there and, together with families from the Middle East, Central Europe, Mexico, South and Central America, and Africa, it is estimated that more than 1,200 school-age children live in the seven blocks that make up the Tenderloin.

In 1994 I was commissioned by the San Francisco Arts Commission to create two sculptures for the Tenderloin Children's Center, a beautiful new recreation center. This project was spearheaded by the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center, an advocacy group working in the neighborhood, and I consulted closely with them throughout my work on the sculptures. In 1996, when their dream of building a state-of-the-art elementary school was finally coming true after eight long years of effort, they asked me also to be part of this new project. The late internationally known architect Joe Esherick who, with Jennifer Devlin, designed the school, had a vision of wrapping the exterior of the school with tile made by students so the public could see the learning taking place inside. It was decided that I would work with the children.

Darleen Lau, the wonderful principal of Redding Elementary, which sits on the northern edge of the neighborhood and serves Tenderloin children, agreed to my setting up a studio in the hallway to work with her teachers and students while the new school was being built. The subject matter evolved in response to the classroom curriculum, which we added to and adapted visually.

There are five fifty-square-foot picture areas and a two-hundred-foot connecting border. One area, titled "Women We Admire," was done by fourth and fifth graders. They chose famous women—like Florence Nightingale, Helen Keller, Amelia Earhart and Rosa Parks—to draw and write about, as well as women close to them: aunts, grandmothers and mothers. A strong theme runs through the lives of all the women, with the words that describe them forming a border between the windows: caring, tenacity, gentleness, strength, kindness and courage. As I worked on the street during the installation, it was wonderful to watch women walking by, then stopping to look and read.

Another area consists of interpretations of two children's stories, "The Tiny Seed" and "The Carrot Seed," both about tenacity and the miracle of growth, metaphors for the effort of building the school.

The "World Map" places the Tenderloin at the center of the world. Each city block in the neighborhood is represented by the flag of a home country of Tenderloin residents. The continents, illustrated with plants, animal life, planets and stars, surround the map. Around the windows are self-portraits of more than eighty children. I took a class on a walking tour of the neighborhood. We talked about what we saw—the good and the bad—

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and discussed how we could improve it. Their ideas are represented in the border panels under the map: building schools and parks, planting trees and flowers, recycling, keeping the neighborhood clean, and feeding the hungry. The excerpt from SGI President Ikeda's poem "The Sun of Jiyu Over a New Land" is here in this border.

Fourth- and fifth-grade students of Janet Welsh studied this excerpt word for word, and the class wrote its own poem, "Room 9," in response. This inspired the students to create the panel that faces Van Ness Avenue, one of the busiest streets in San Francisco. Along with Mr. Ikeda's poem excerpt are portraits of representative students illustrating the racial and cultural diversity of their classroom and showing themselves standing on the Golden Gate Bridge with tools of construction in their hands.

"Room 9"

We are many cultures,  
Our room is America,  
Our minds, our hearts, our spirits  
    will shape the future,  
Unstoppable.  
Our unique gifts,  
    elements creating, building,  
    crossing a bridge  
    to knowledge, understanding,  
    hope, respect.

The Tenderloin Community School will open, and my work in the neighborhood will continue. The Redding Elementary students, who gave their art work to the new school, and I are halfway finished with another large-scale project that will enhance their nearly 100-year-old building. These two projects will give a strong voice to the children of the Tenderloin who, coming from many different cultures, worked side by side to create something new. The excerpt from "The Sun of Jiyu Over a New Land" perfectly illustrates their efforts.

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