



Providence RECenter employees—from left, Cathy Schultz, Brooke Leitch and Carmen Fermin—talk with patron Barbara Landers about the mural. To Landers, “It’s raised the energy level.”

Athletic Center Gets Artistic Boost

Mural Meant to Inspire, Reinforce Sense of Activity

By DIANE MATTINGLY
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After 21 years of playing host to area fitness buffs, the Providence RECenter in the Falls Church area has just received an artistic facelift.

A mural, about 24 feet high by 50 feet wide, now occupies a formerly white triangular-shaped wall in the foyer of the center on Marc Drive.

For the center’s general manager, Patti Gibson, the project completes part of a vision: to update the look of the aging facility.

“The wall has gone through many transformations,” she said. “At one time a huge picture of a panda [the center’s mascot] hung in that space, and a local art guild once used the wall to display some of its big works of art. But I had always thought how cool it would be to get something painted.”

With that vision in mind, Gibson got approval from her supervisors at the county Park Authority to look at what might be done with the space.

That led to the mural project, which was awarded to Tim Grant of Britten-Grant Event Design in Ashburn. The project evolved, Grant said, over about 200 hours, 100 of which were before he and Elaine Crowell, who collaborated on the project, even started painting.

Gibson met Grant six years ago when she worked at the Audrey Moore RECenter in Annandale, where Grant was hired to paint a fantasy mural of the undersea world of Atlantis.



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE K. KOFFERDIAL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Artists Tim Grant of Arlington and Elaine Crowell of Reston styled their mural, in the main entrance to the Falls Church area RECenter, after the fluid forms of Henri Matisse. At far left is a detail of the mural depicting aquatic activity.

Grant said he originally proposed about six ideas to Gibson.

“We wanted it to stylistically fit the space and capture the rhythm of athletics without getting bogged down into the details of [an athlete’s] gritty face,” said Grant.

Gibson said the project evolved from something that was too busy, to a stained-glass look, to an abstract rendering of the center’s roof peeled back to reveal the activities inside. They considered a patriotic theme with a large American flag and another one depicting various national monuments.

The favored design was a Matisse-style mural in blue, green and black of stylized forms that represented the athletic options offered at Providence.

“The first form is of a swimmer. Then there is

an energy shape [an abstract form that leads from one activity to another], then a racquetball player, another energy shape, then a form that looks like it is stretching or doing Pilates, another energy shape, a diver, a swimmer and another diver, and then someone exercising,” said Crowell.

“Each form was designed separately. We tried to make everything feel like they’re connecting,” she said.

“The energy shapes start out seedlike, then they open up. They accent the action—then the last one explodes. We didn’t want the mural to be weak; we wanted it to have a strength to it,” said Grant.

Because the mural wall borders a stairwell that angles as it descends, Grant said the biggest challenge was to figure out the scaffolding.

The first night was spent erecting the scaffolding. It took another night to sketch out the mural and another five nights to paint it. The last step was to apply a clear coat, which Grant said made the original sketch lines come through the paint. The two artists had to go back and repaint over the sketch lines.

They worked on the project from 9:30 p.m. until 5:30 a.m. to limit interference with people using the center.

Barbara Landers, a regular client at the center and a former volunteer there, said: “I can’t believe the energy, the life that this mural has added. It’s created a positive attitude and has boosted the level of activity.”

“I dream I’m everybody up there but that guy, the one with the broad shoulders,” said Landers, pointing to the different forms that flow across the wall.

“We’d like to continue the theme in the fitness room and maybe downstairs on the wall—not the mural but the colors,” said Gibson.

