



St. Anthony's Pre-School director and teacher Jen O'Leary spent months creating a hallway mural.



The Hallway mural at St. Anthony's Preschool has Oceanside students thrilled.

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By Kepherd Daniel

Jen O'Leary, director of St. Anthony's Pre-School in Ocean-side, has breathed new life into the school building by adding a vibrant mural that she created, transforming the space into an inviting environment for children.

The mural, which surrounds the hallways when entering the pre school section of the parish, depicts playful and colorful seasonal scenes, filling the hallway with a sense of wonder and excitement. The art project, which O'Leary began in February and recently completed herself, marks just one of the many ways she has revitalized the school since stepping into the director's role a year and a half ago while also balancing the role of being a teacher at the school.

O'Leary's decision to create the mural was inspired by her desire to enhance the learning environment for the children.

"I wanted to do something that made the school feel more like a welcoming, creative space for the kids," O'Leary said.

The mural, with its bright colors and cheerful imagery, reflects the playful spirit of the children who pass by it each day, and has become a favorite among both students and parents.

For O'Leary, the mural is part of a broader effort to breathe new life into the school. She first became involved with St. Anthony's Pre-School when she enrolled her youngest child, eventually taking on a teaching role and then transitioning to director. She had been a teacher at the preschool for over 10 years. Since then, she has been committed to modernizing and improving the school, both aesthetically and academically.

The School enrolls students 2 years old up to 4 years old. O'Leary, a long-time Oceanside resident, has helped revitalize the school through artistic projects, updated technology and a hands-on approach to both education and leadership.

After her youngest child was enrolled at St. Anthony's, O'Leary seized the opportunity, inquiring about any open positions, and soon after, she joined the staff. Starting out teaching the two-year-olds, O'Leary gradually worked her way up, ultimately taking on the role of director. Since stepping into the leadership position, she has focused on enhancing the educational experience for both students and teachers.

"When I became director, I really wanted to shake things up," O'Leary said. "The school had become somewhat stale and stagnant, and it needed a fresh perspective."

O'Leary's commitment to modernization has been supported by St. Anthony's pastor, Father James Donovan, S.J., who, as a former teacher himself, understood the importance of providing resources to foster growth. With his backing, O'Leary introduced iPads, projectors and other technology to the classrooms. These upgrades allow the children to engage with media through YouTube and interactive activities — a significant shift for the Catholic school, which previously had limited access to such resources.

O'Leary has also taken the lead on significant cosmetic improvements, including new floors and fresh coats of paint in various rooms, creating a more inviting and vibrant atmosphere.

As a talented artist, O'Leary has contributed her personal flair to the school by creating posters and artwork for the graduating four-year-olds, infusing the space with warmth and childlike wonder.

"I love the creativity," O'Leary said. "I plan to do more painting in the future, especially in the office and classrooms, making it feel more like a school and a welcoming place for children."

O'Leary's artistic contributions have been well received by parents and teachers alike. Rockville Centre resident Shannon Lutz, a parent of three children who have all attended the preschool, expressed her admiration for O'Leary's efforts.

"Jen has been an incredible influence on the school," Lutz said. "Her dedication, both as a teacher and director, shines through in everything she does. The creativity she brings is just one example of how much she cares for this school and the kids."

O'Leary continues to balance her dual roles as a teacher and director, teaching the 4-year-olds in the morning and handling administrative duties in the afternoon. This shift in scheduling has eased some of the workload, allowing her to focus more on her responsibilities as director while ensuring that the children receive the best preparation for kindergarten.

She has also introduced a new curriculum this year, aiming to better prepare students by applying skills typically taught to older children at earlier stages.

"Kids aren't writing as much anymore due to the use of technology, so we've noticed fine motor skills are weaker," O'Leary said. "That's something we're addressing early on to ensure these kids are ready for school."

One of the challenges O'Leary has faced is the shift in parenting styles, which has required teachers to adapt to a more "gentle parenting" approach. However, she remains focused on fostering a positive, faith-based education for the children, integrating prayer and religious instruction into daily routines.

Looking to the future, O'Leary envisioned more enhancements, including incorporating STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education into the curriculum and fostering more creative outlets for the children.

In addition, under her direction, the school has held numerous successful fundraisers, which have allowed for the purchase of new area rugs, iPads and playground equipment.

"Fundraising is crucial for us, and we've done more of it since I took over," O'Leary said. "This is my parish, and I want to see the school flourish."

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