

Huge mural adds sea life to aquatic center

By TIM KELLER — For the Comet | Posted: Saturday, May 16, 2015 12:00 am

RATON – As the 10-year-old boy surfaces from deep below the diving board, forgive him if he momentarily thinks he’s entered a new world, still deep below the aquamarine water but now among a coral reef inhabited by orca whales lit from the surface above by slanting sun rays coming, in fact, from the big high west windows of the Raton Regional Aquatic Center.

Starting almost seven feet above the pool’s deck along the aquatic center’s south wall, a huge and realistic new mural stands 20-feet tall and spans 60-feet along the center’s biggest and deepest pool. A climbing wall above the deep end puts that boy right in with the orcas.

The stunning mural is the latest in a long line of public artworks by artist and muralist Melinda Marlowe, who started painting murals in San Antonio, TX, in the 1980s but whose more recent works are concentrated around her longtime hometown of Cimarron. One of several murals at Philmont Scout Ranch is even bigger than the new one at the aquatic center. Another adorns the courtyard at the Express St. James Hotel. Cimarron’s United Methodist Church has one. Some are historical scenes.

“They’re mostly New Mexico scenery and wildlife,” Marlowe says. She photographs area landscapes and researches wildlife before designing her murals on paper. Then the paint goes on the wall. “I just love to get a big canvas like that,” she says.

For the aquatic center’s undersea project, she researched coral reefs and orca whales, along with other inhabitants of the mural—pilot fish, clownfish, silver school fish, a moray eel, and a white-tipped shark. “All of the fish in the painting are real fish based on my research,” she says. Marlowe drew a grid on the wall underlying the mural so she could create all of her undersea life to scale—yes, each of those orcas is life size.

She presented her drawings to City of Raton Parks & Recreation director Jared Chatterley, who took them to the Parks & Recreation Board for approval.



Artist Melinda Marlowe carefully researched before she designed and painted detailed life-size ocean wildlife for the Raton Aquatic Center. The 60-foot mural includes three adult orca whales with two orca calves, plus a white-tipped shark, moray eel, clownfish, pilot fish, and silver school fish.

“I couldn’t do it for what Jared offered, but I made a proposal in December and they made it happen. It’s a \$24,000 mural that I did for \$6000 but it was worth it to me because it was so much fun.” In fact, she became so invested in the project and the site that she’s already planning a pair of smaller murals for the opposite wall, across all of the pools, that she’ll paint free of charge.

“Jared will provide the materials. I’ll make two large panels in my home studio, probably 8’x12’ Masonite. I’ll design and paint them at home, then we’ll move them here and mount them on the far side from the big mural. It’ll pull in the rest of the room and increase the sense of being under the sea.”

She started the big mural in March and finished it last week. “It painted a lot faster than I anticipated. It probably has only about 15 full days of painting.” She used ten gallons of regular house paint, recommended and prepared by Kerry Medina at Record’s Ace Hardware. “I used three gallons of blue, two gallons of black, and more than a gallon of white. There’s also four quarts of various other blues,” Marlowe says.

Chatterley gave her a key to the aquatic center and she worked all day on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, leaving the first two days of each week for her other work: she teaches art for Cimarron Municipal Schools.

“For 34 years, I taught math, science, language arts, and special education, with the last 14 years in Cimarron,” she says. “I’ve used art in all of my teaching and every subject area, because it’s such a part of who I am.”

Marlowe finally retired from teaching in 2009 to have more time for her art. Her retirement lasted four years.

“The Cimarron superintendent of schools, Adan Estrada, saw my murals all over town, and he saw me working. In 2013, he asked me to return to teaching and teach art. I told him, ‘But I’m not an art teacher.’ He said ‘You’re an artist and a teacher. I want you to teach art.’” They agreed that she could teach on Mondays and Tuesdays. She’s enjoyed it for two years, but this month she’s retiring again as mural commissions and other art projects excite her. She likes challenging, exciting projects.

That’s why she can’t leave Raton Regional Aquatic Center without completing the vision she developed over the past two months, adding undersea life to the walls across the pools from the big orcas and white-tipped shark and silver school fish. That makes it a work in progress, and that’s when she’s happiest.