

TO THE YOUNG



Student art decorates the ceiling tiles in the school.

through more in a short lifetime than adults have been through sometimes in their entire life," McCaffery said.

On Thursday night, MercyFirst held its 10th annual scholarship dinner at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, honoring 23 MercyFirst children who have emerged from troubled childhoods to make it to college or vocational training school. They are attending schools including Binghamton University, Stony Brook University and Hunter College.

Last fall, Karen Pence, wife of Vice President Mike Pence, came to the Syosset campus to learn about its art therapy program, a field she has been interested in for years. She had planned a two-hour visit. She stayed four hours.

The origin of the visit was a project the residents had done, making postcard-size paintings with positive messages that they sent to children who had fled the civil war in Syria and were living in a refugee camp in Turkey, McCaffery said.

To the amazement of the MercyFirst residents, the Syr-



Karen Pence and students painted this montage together.

ian children not only received the artwork, but responded — sending their own small pieces of artwork back thanking the residents.

"Our kids were just kind of blown away by it," McCaffery said.

The MercyFirst project ended up on display at the United Nations, where Pence learned that it had been done by MercyFirst. She asked to visit the center.

When she came, she did an art project with the residents. They painted birds together — the MercyFirst symbol of two doves, which represent parent and child, and a cardinal, the state bird of Indiana, where Pence had been first lady when her husband, Mike

Pence, was governor.

The montage was the idea of the residents, McCaffery said.

"It was just really very moving," he said. "There was nothing political about it."

Today, the montage — painted on a white tile — graces the ceiling in a school hallway along with dozens of other artworks by the residents.

For math teacher Danielle DeFranco, MercyFirst is helping the children succeed across the board. She knew she wanted to teach at the campus from the moment she visited six years ago.

"It's a beautiful place to work," she said. "And I want to work here until I retire."



Michael Hynes, superintendent of the Patchogue-Medford school district, which has embraced the whole-child approach to education.

Forum to explore learning options

BY JOIE TYRRELL
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One of the nation's largest networks for alternative education will host its annual conference at LIU Post this month, drawing experts and educators interested in innovative approaches to learning.

The conference, organized and presented by The Alternative Education Resource Organization, a Roslyn Heights nonprofit that was founded in 1989, will be held from June 28 to July 1.

Speakers include national and international educators, some of whom have founded alternative schools in their communities, as well as others who are experts on learner-centered education. Workshops will focus both on how to start a school and how parents can find schools that foster a child's self-directed learning.

The basic concept behind the conference is the belief that children are natural learners, said Jerry Mintz, founder of AERO, which serves as a networker helping parents, teachers and students find learner-based educational alternatives.

"This is a chance for Long Islanders to really come to see what their choices are," Mintz said.

The schools in AERO's network cover a wide spectrum both nationally and internationally, including charter schools, Montessori and Waldorf schools, magnet schools and

home schooling, among others.

About 200 participants are expected to attend the conference, which is in its 15th year.

Mintz said that local residents interested in going to the conference can make a tax-deductible donation of their choice to AERO.

Sir Ken Robinson, a British author and educator who is based in California, will be a keynote speaker and answer questions via Skype. His TED talk, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" is a top presentation for the online organization that posts videos from experts across all fields and has over 51 million views. He keynoted the AERO conference in 2012, in Portland, Oregon, where next year's conference will be held.

Local speakers include Michael Hynes, superintendent of the Patchogue-Medford school district, and Nassau County Legis. Joshua Lafazan, who will speak on his experience of running for school board as a high school student and his journey from Nassau Community College to Harvard.

The Patchogue-Medford district has embraced the whole-child approach to education, said Hynes, adding the conference offers an opportunity to learn about other methods and philosophies of educating children.

"We also believe in expanding our understanding of what it means to be 'educated' and how we actually do this within our school system," Hynes said.