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Jack Arent / Daily News

Local teens have been helping paint a 450-square-foot mural at the new East Palo Alto Police Department headquarters depicting officers and residents coexisting in harmony. The mural is set to be finished today.

Living in harmony

Mural reflects police youth outreach

By Banks Albach / Daily News Staff Writer

Anyone arriving at East Palo Alto's new police headquarters will see a giant wall painting depicting what this department strives to be: a major part of the community.

The teenagers who helped paint the mural - a roughly 450-square-foot image of officers and residents hanging in harmony - found the premise of community policing slightly ironic. They've feared police for much of their lives, said Sonya Clark-Herrera, executive director of the East Palo Alto Mural Arts Project.

"They thought it was an oxymoron," she said. "They didn't get it."

As the department sets up at 141 Demeter St., Police Chief Ron Davis is hoping the mural reflects past efforts and future attempts to forge links between police and the community members they protect and serve - and sometimes arrest.

The department has launched numerous outreach programs, Davis said. A \$150,000 U.S. Department of Justice grant paid for anti-gang classes for about 200 students. School Resources Officer Toney Canty teaches a 15-pupil junior police academy program -- a possible channel, Davis said, to the department's

cadet program. And Davis is confident that his monthly chats and weekly beat meetings give residents access to criticize or compliment law enforcement.

"You don't just achieve it," Davis said. "You have to strive for it every day."

The teenagers also sat down with Davis and discussed community policing. They realized that police aren't all that bad, Clark-Herrera said.

"The students ... were shocked that they had children, that they were real people, had real problems and led real lives," Clark-Herrera said.

Fifteen East Palo Alto teens have worked on the mural. It's the latest of about 23 throughout Menlo Park, East Palo Alto and Redwood City from the arts project. Through constant fundraising, and help with resources from Stanford, the project is able to pay teens between \$9 and \$16 per hour, Clark-Herrera said. The department also paid \$7,500 for the mural, marking the second commissioned art venture the nonprofit has worked on.

Rachel McIntire, one of the founding members of the art project and a lead mural artist, said they hoped to have the mural finished today. The mural arts project was started in 2001 and has served about 300 kids from Menlo Park, East Palo Alto and Redwood City.

E-mail Banks Albach at balbach@dailynewsgroup.com.