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Lindy Magallanes & Amanda Mojarro
Lic # 201231650/201231646
Lindy.Magallanes@Century21.com
541.517.1807
c21nuggetrealty.com

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Mural from A1

new home, the mural represents a tide change for the school as programs, staff and students are solidifying their roles.

"I feel like our family is whole again," said Scrima.

Some teachers like Brandi Baker-Rudicel who previously worked part-time have also transitioned to full-time positions, offering more consistency for the students and adding to the school's overall enhancement of curricula.

"There are things that have been greatly improved since moving out here," Baker-Rudicel said, citing the larger space available as

allowing breathing room for new programs and teaching opportunities.

As such, the mural isn't the only thing new under the Delight Valley sun. AKHS plans to broaden the scope of its work programs this year, for instance, will allow more career options for students in the future.

"We're trying to capitalize on our sustainability concepts and the work and job opportunities that we have here and extend those opportunities to other students," Scrima said.

Part of this will include certifying teachers like Baker-Rudicel as Career and Technical Education (CTE) instructors in order to add two CTE programs to the school's menu of classes. Hopes are to coordinate with Cottage Grove High School's dozen or so CTE programs already in play.

On the alternative school's end, the CTE program will involve the students creating a business plan for the school that will market its gardening products.

"We're not sure what that's going to look like, but it's going to come from students in order to be successful here," said Scrima. "That's kind of the Kennedy way."

The school has also begun a social/emotional responsibility curriculum and an advisory program which addresses job skills and prepares students for real-world experiences, raising their chances of job retention.

"That's the primary goal, teach those job skills, what it's like to be in a competitive job market and be successful in it," said Scrima.

The new mural itself is part of a leadership project through the federal Workforce Innovations Opportunity Act program (WIOA), a service which provides access to training and employment for a range of career types.

Samantha Kelsey, a 20-year-old AKHS graduate, designed the mural as part of the WIOA program and was aided in painting it by the school's WIOA Transition Specialist Heather Lawson. The duo spent more than 30 hours painting it.

"One of the reasons I wanted to work on this project is because Kennedy has been a really valuable part of our community for a long time," Lawson said. "I really wanted to do something that gave more pride on the campus and give back to a school that gives so much to kids

that just need one more chance."

Now living in Philadelphia, Kelsey's return to Cottage Grove for the summer runs in congruence with one of the school's values. Kelsey could not be reached for comment by press time.

"One of the big deals around here is the notion of giving back," said Scrima. "We try to teach kids here that giving back to the community is really important."

With these programs and values in mind, a primary goal of the school this year is to improve attendance.

"We just want this to be a great place to be where folks feel at home and feel comfortable and want to give back," said Scrima. "We're hoping our social/emotional learning pieces, increased family activities, experiential learning trips and those kinds of things will bring kids in and help them feel comfortable and want to be here more."

This year, AKHS is looking forward to building a new greenhouse and creating a makerspace studio, which will include a 3D printer, laser cutter and other building tools. It's hoped that such additions will enhance students' sense of purpose and community at the institution through meaningful projects and skill development.

"We're trying to make sure that we're focusing on improving morale and the culture of the school to get students here," said Scrima.

With the new symbolic decoration on the front of the school, Baker-Rudicel expressed optimism about the atmosphere of the upcoming year.

"We always had murals up at the old school and we noticed that, moving here, that it wasn't ours yet," she said. "And this was one of the big steps to making it ours, is having students put their mark on the building for future generations to see."

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