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Ways of water: Artists tell story of Laramie's most precious resource

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Local artist Paul Taylor talks about the origins of a mural project completed with Laramie High School students. The mural portrays the origins of water in Laramie through Aboriginal learning and symbolic methods.

Abby Vander Graaff/Boomerang

When considering how water flows from the mountain ranges and into the Laramie Valley's aquifer, rivers and springs, one can't help but notice just how much each aspect of the landscape is connected.

For the past few years, a group of local artists, scientists and students have worked to honor this connection and share it with the community. Now at the close of the project, the team has created four collaborative murals that tell Laramie's water story both in content and form.

“The underpinning of the entire project is Aboriginal wisdom, and we need more of that,” said Paul Taylor, the artistic director on the project.

Hailing from Australia, Taylor's mission is to share traditional, land-based Aboriginal teachings with students through the process of creating art.

For the mural project, this has meant dedicating time to understanding where the life-giving resource of water comes from and celebrating that knowledge as part of a larger practice known as “caring for country.”

“Aboriginal people in Australia cared for land, which is your mother, and in particular you cared for your water,” Taylor said.

Taylor gathered his knowledge from what he calls “bush university” – the nature of Australia's Northern Territory where 90-year-old Aboriginal elder Bill Harney shares his wisdom with others.

“All this wisdom is painted on rock art, and he sits down and tells the stories,”

Taylor said.



The mural "Pilot Hill Rainbow" designed by Madie Sprinkle with Justin Deegan, Rebecca Watson and Erin Klauk is on display at Laramie High School. Students and community members worked on the mural, which depicts the Pilot Hill Recreation Area and Casper Aquifer recharge zone.

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Symbolism from Aborigine culture is present throughout the murals. Each uses a traditional dotting technique and the Rainbow Serpent, the figure that brought Aboriginal people water, can be seen throughout the series in the form of local rivers.

Taylor collaborated with Rebecca Watson, an art teacher at Laramie High School, to get students involved in the project. The group worked with scientists from University of Wyoming to learn about the area's water systems, and the project took off from there.

"I learned just how massive (Laramie's water system) is and how much of it affects us," said Mitchell Gray, an LHS graduate who designed one of the murals.

Each mural depicts a different aspect of the area's water cycle. One honors the Snowy Range Mountains, a primary watershed from which rain and snowmelt flows into the Laramie River which provides about half of the city's water.

Another depicts the Casper Aquifer, which is located on the western slope of the Laramie Mountain Range. The mural demonstrates how snow and rain filter through the limestone and sandstone layers of the aquifer and eventually flow into City Springs and other springs around the valley, providing up to 1,100 gallons of groundwater to the community each minute.





A group of collaborators on the Laramie High School Mural Project pose in front of their work at Laramie High School Thursday. From left to right, they are Paul Taylor, Mitchell Gray, Erin Klauk, Aeslin Mattimore, Parker Jackson, Rebecca Watson and Justin Deegan.

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With the Snowy Range visible from one side of the school and Pilot Hill from the other, LHS is a perfect location for the project. This is something the artists wouldn't discover until later when they learned more about where local water comes from.

“At first we thought it was just the Laramie River, then we discovered the Casper Aquifer,” Watson said.

After talking with scientists, the artists realized that the community's waterways aren't just valuable, they're also interconnected. After creating a design and base coating for the murals, they shared that message with the community by inviting members of the public to participate in the creation process.

The team brought the murals to the Shepard Symposium and local galleries, where anyone could come and place a dot, or “raindrop,” on the mural. Through this process, more than 200 people contributed to each mural, Taylor said.

“My favorite part was tying the whole community together,” said Parker Jackson, an LHS graduate who worked on the project. “I got to see everyone who attended apply a dot to the mural.”

For Taylor, the process tied the project back to messages of balance and connectedness that are central to Aboriginal ideology.

"We're all just raindrops," he said. "We're all made of water."

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