

OLPH students make religious mosaic out of M&Ms

Images of Our Lady of Perpetual Help have been rendered in oil paint, watercolor and wooden carvings, but none has looked as sweet as the one just finished by 25 fifth-graders at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Ellicott City.

Made of 2,169 brightly colored M&M candies, the vibrant mosaic of the famous Marian icon is the culmination of hours of patient artistry. Working from a photo of an icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the youngsters enlarged the image and pasted it on a poster board. They then carefully selected matching colored candies, gluing each M&M to the poster board - sort of like a sugary paint-by-number approach.

Ryan McGuire, a 10-year-old fifth-grader, came up with the idea after reading about the world's largest M&M mosaic in the Guinness Book of World Records. The students had hoped to smash the record - an image made of 5,040 M&Ms - but that proved too ambitious. Their first attempt was just a warm-up for a much bigger mosaic they hope will put them in the record book in the future.

The hardest part of the project was refraining from munching on the hard-shelled chocolate candies, according to Ryan.

"It was also hard getting them to stick," he explained. Not only did the students have to pick the right colors, he said, they had to place each candy at the proper angle so they would fit properly.

The students used green, yellow, red, blue, white and brown M&M. They were fortunate to snag some bags of special pink Valentine's Day M&Ms that could be

used for the faces of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus.

“Otherwise we would have had to use orange,” said Rhonda Cynkar, the art teacher who helped the students with the project during art class. Students put the mosaic together over the course of four weekly art classes.

While working on the mosaic, students studied the history of the much-loved image in religion class, said Ms. Cynkar. According to legend, St. Luke crafted the original icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help while Mary was living in Jerusalem. The image shows the Child Jesus fleeing into the arms of his mother as he contemplates his future passion and death.

“Working on the mosaic was a way to show our love for our school and our parish,” said Ms. Cynkar, noting that students have seen religious mosaics during field trips to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

Sydney Hunter, a 10-year-old fifth grader, said working on the project gave her a new appreciation for the difficulty of producing a mosaic like the ones at the national shrine.

“It must have taken a really, really long time,” she marveled.

Ms. Cynkar said she intends to apply a special spray to the 30-inch tall, 20-inch-wide student mosaic to preserve it. The image will then permanently hang in a school hallway, she said.

Glancing at the local masterpiece, Ryan smiled and offered a warning.

“Keep it away from the heater,” he said with a laugh.