

WHITTIER DAILY NEWS

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Disadvantaged children paint a piece of blimp

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PICO RIVERA — The world's largest blimp was the artistic target of Pico Rivera children Thursday in a nationwide collaboration to paint a mural onto the surface of the giant airship.

The blimp will tour the country's major sporting events and public ceremonies as part of the "Soaring Dreams Program" this spring. The project utilizes the country's largest passenger blimp, owned by Ameriquest Mortgage Co., which is partnering in the effort along with the Santa Monica-based Portraits of Hope, a nonprofit organization.

"Soaring Dreams" brings more than 6,000 disadvantaged children from after-school programs, pediatric care facilities and youth organizations from around the American Southwest together to create a gigantic, airborne mural.

"No one else has ever done anything like this," said Susan

Nassberg, executive director of Portraits of Hope. "Last year, to celebrate 100 years of flying, the kids covered an airplane the same way and no one thought we could do that either. But we were able to say, 'Look, we did it!'"

"We do this so these children — many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds — learn that they can accomplish the impossible," she said.

Rather than canvas, the children paint and sign sticker-like labels, different in size, color and shape combinations — some as large as 400 square feet.

After the pieces are painted, they will be assembled over the surface of the airship in a blimp hangar in Tustin.

"This is a great way for kids to get excited about their future and the idea of leadership," said Assemblyman Ron Calderon, who assisted in the project. "They'll remember this project the rest of their lives."

Calderon said he flew down from Sacramento especially for



Staff photo by LEO JARZOMB

FROM LEFT, Alondra Dominguez, 6, Joseph Luna, 5, and Crystal Jordan, 5, paint a panel Thursday that will be used on the Ameriquest blimp.

Thursday's event. He gave a short speech to the children, saying that if it wasn't for people believing in him when he was young, he wouldn't have achieved the position he now enjoys as a public servant. When he finished speaking, the kids all ran out to the mats, arranged like jumbo puzzle pieces on the floor.

With the Monkees' "I'm a Believer" blaring in the back-

ground, the children painted all the pieces of a giant blue square. Then they painted their own individual blimp-shaped piggy banks.

The Pico Rivera event was the 61st session out of about 70 similar events from Texas to California, said Nassberg.

The countrywide tour of the blimp will commence sometime in the spring, with its debut in Los Angeles.