

Well-known graffiti artist will help launch 400-block's revival effort

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

A Watsonville graffiti artist whose work has won renown as far away as Los Angeles will launch a mural contest sponsored by property owners and merchants on the east side of Main Street's 400 block.

On Sunday, Sept. 9, Mario Martinez, the 17-year-old artist and Watsonville native, will begin and complete — in 12 hours, he says — a mural on the back wall of the former Register-Pajaronian building, which fronts on East Lake Avenue.

Martinez has been doing graffiti art since he was a child.

On that same day, the 400 block group will host its first "Sunday Celebration." The weekly event will include an open-air farmers market, which has been coordinated with the Farm Bureau. Organizers also promise free music, booths and tables set up by non-profit groups, and children's entertainment as the event gears up.

The Sunday Celebration will take place behind the Mansion House and other businesses on the block, starting at noon and continuing throughout the after-

noon each Sunday.

The idea of covering parts of downtown Watsonville with murals has been floated several times in the past. Recently, the idea has surfaced again — from several quarters — as word has begun to spread about a town in British Columbia, Canada, called Chemainus.

Chemainus was a dying lumber town until it announced a mural contest to cover the city with scenes out of its history. Artists came from all over to volunteer their efforts, and worked from old photographs to create realistic-looking scenes of everything from the Native Americans who originally populated the area to the interior of a dry goods store.

Since then, Chemainus has become a booming tourist town, and has adopted the motto, "the little town that could."

By coincidence, both Charlene Shaffer, executive director of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce, and Diane Varni, a local photographer who sells her work in Hall's bookshop and is a staff photographer for the Register-Pajaronian, visited Chemainus this summer and came back convinced that Watsonville could do the

same.

When Hall announced the mural contest and Sunday event at this week's City Council meeting, Councilman Oscar Rios said that he, too, was familiar with Chemainus and had been thinking it would be a good idea for Watsonville.

It was Varni who contacted Hall and told her about both Chemainus and Mario Martinez, Hall said.

The concept of the contest, Hall said, is that building owners donate materials and artists volunteer their efforts in return for the recognition.

The 400 Block East Association, as the group calls itself, will have sign-up sheets for the contest available Sept. 9 at the Sunday Celebration. Mural artists of all ages are encouraged to submit sketches for 400-block walls. The theme should be an aspect or aspects of the cultures and history of the Pajaro Valley, Hall said.

Other property owners in Watsonville who have blank walls and would like to participate in the mural contest can call La Manzana Bookshop at 724-4339 for more information.