

APRIL IS CHILD ABUSE AWARENESS MONTH

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE Through April 2020

Stratford, CT—Memorial Dedication of **The David Ryan Keeley Garden** at Nichols Elementary School brings awareness to April Child Abuse Awareness month.

The Town of Stratford, CT at Nichols School, 396 Nichols Avenue, will dedicate a memorial on April 15, 2019 at 6 p.m. The public is invited to attend the mural unveiling by artist Michael Sparta in collaboration with mosaic designer Denise Parri, Director of RHD studio program for adults with disabilities. In addition, the new reflection space will be open for the public to enjoy.

According to the *New York Times*, David Ryan Keeley was found August 12, 1987. The bruised body of the boy was found in the apartment of the aunt and uncle who were his legal guardians, less than a year after a police report in which he told the police, “sometimes when I'm bad, Auntie throws me to the ground and they hit me hard,” according to the report released by the Department of Children and Families. This case of child abuse led to system changes under the Rowland administration.

After this tragedy 21 years ago, a tree was planted at Nichols Elementary School in memory of this Kindergartner. Maria Santo remembers David “Ryan” as her son's elementary school classmate. Visiting the site behind Nichols School in 2017 Santo was deeply saddened to find the tree had not thrived and only a heap of weeds existed. Known for her community activism, she was not going to let David Ryan Keeley be forgotten. In 2017, she started a campaign with assistance from Margaret Bodell - Arts Coordinator for the Town of Stratford. They turned to the expertise of Maria’s husband Rob Santo to help design a reflection space to bring peace and awareness. To assist them in getting the work done, they enlisted a team of community volunteers and supporters who made this project become a reality.

Sky Above Me, Earth Below Me, Fire Within Me is the title of the new mosaic, inspired by a painting by artist Michael Gerard Sparta, a young adult with cerebral palsy, who is an accomplished mouth painter from Stony Point NY.

Over the last year the mosaic has been housed at Stratford's Baldwin Center, offering seniors the opportunity to learn the mosaic process. The mosaic was completed at RHD Resources for Human Development, a day program in Stratford for adults with disabilities. Artist Denise Parri interpreted the painting of Michael Sparta spanning 14 feet and has worked tirelessly with volunteers from Stratford and surrounding communities to complete the mosaic.

Mayor Laura Hoydick will speak at the ceremony followed by the unveiling. Local musicians and a community dedicated to change through creative actions for social issues will gather. Visitors and the community can view the memorial at Nichols Elementary School weekdays after 3 p.m. and on weekends. Visitors during school hours are asked to check in at the front desk.

For more information and photos contact Margaret Bodell 203-727-7280 or mmbodell@gmail.com

Visit David Ryan Keeley Memorial Garden on Facebook

<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/22/nyregion/a-boy-s-death-spurs-changes-in-connecticut.html>