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Students at Oakton Elementary sit in the school's auditorium, where a series of murals from the 1930s that depict Charlemagne are on display. The school received a grant to restore the deteriorating murals.

State saves 'Damsels' in disrepair

By: Nomaan Merchant

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As students sit in Oakton Elementary School's auditorium, Charlemagne and his troops surround them as he fights the Moors in ninth-century Europe.

The school, 436 Ridge Ave., is home to a series of murals depicting Charlemagne, the founder of the Holy Roman Empire. But as Oakton has struggled to maintain the murals, many have fallen into disrepair.

Thanks to a state grant, Charlemagne will once again reign over the Oakton auditorium.

For more than a half-century the vivid paintings, titled "Knights and Damsels," have offered a real-life history lesson - the murals were sponsored by the Works Progress Administration as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

The murals are "part of the school's history," Oakton principal Q. T. Carter said. "(The collection) represents the Great Depression."

But water leakage and everyday wear began damaging the paintings in the early 1990s. Now many of the murals are missing spots and a few are nearly ruined.

As the murals slowly fell apart, artists made notes about each mural's basic design in case funding became available to restore the works. But Margaret Nowosielska, an expert in mural preservation at the Chicago Conservation Center, analyzed Oakton's murals and said they might never be completely restored, but rather reconstructed.

Nowosielska, who has worked with murals for over 30 years, said excessive humidity caused salt to migrate from the building's walls to the murals. A leak in the roof made the problem worse, but the school did not have funds to save the artwork.

In 1997, private donations helped the school restore two smaller murals. Other corporations have also sponsored modest restorations.

The Chicago Conservation Center estimated in 2000 that repairing all the damage would cost about \$130,000. Evanston/Skokie School District 65 declined to fund the restoration, citing more pressing needs in its tight budget.

But earlier this year, Illinois state Rep. Julie Hamos (D-18th) helped Oakton obtain a \$100,000 grant from the state legislature.

Hamos said she became interested in the murals four years ago when she was invited to Oakton to see them.

"I was awed by the sense of history," Hamos said. "We had a slice of history and we were at great risk of losing it."

The grant was approved this spring mainly because of the state's strong economic growth, she said. Carter said the school received the grant money recently and is pursuing the rest of the funding from private donors. He said he hopes the murals will be restored by summer 2007.

"I didn't believe it," said Carter, who added that the state promised similar funds two years ago and did not come through. "I wouldn't believe it until the money was here."

The finished murals would give "a huge boost to that community," Hamos said.

"I was thrilled that this got done," Hamos said. "There was this great risk that (the murals) would disappear sooner rather than later."

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