



Cover Artist:
**David
Fichter '69**

By Alison Frye

During last spring's Project Week, David Fichter '69 was brought to campus thanks in part to a grant from the Mason Hirst Foundation of Alexandria, Virginia, for a mural project exploring the intersection of art and social change.

"The intersection of art and social change." It suggests movement, that art drives social change, that they connect and sometimes collide, and are more powerful together than apart.

David has worked at this intersection for the last 25 years, as a community muralist. His works—colorful, relevant, and beautiful—tell the story of a place and its people. David brings a community together in both the planning and the painting of his murals, which are on display across the U.S. and in such disparate places as Armenia, Georgia, and Nicaragua. His Mystic River mural, along I-93 in Somerville, Massachusetts, began in 1996 and grows every summer as new students create panels and continue to tell the story of the Mystic River's environment, wildlife, and history.

The Putney School students felt strongly that the mural was a chance to reach beyond their world at Putney School, and connect with the greater Putney community.

We considered a number of locations in town—the fire station, the paper mill, the general store. One of our student muralists had attended Putney Central School (PCS), and the school's principal wanted the mural at PCS. Ultimately, that's where we decided to put it. The completed mural is 52 feet long and 8 feet high, painted onto 13 panels.

More than 50 people, from The Putney School, the Putney Central School, and the wider community helped paint the mural, which will be installed this fall.

The next step was to brainstorm—for the design team to figure out what would be on the mural.

We involved PCS students in this process, so that the mural would reflect their culture, too. There was a strong collaborative effort between The Putney School and the Putney Central School kids and teachers who helped paint the mural. Including the area's agricultural history as well as all of the local farmers was important to the students from the beginning. But then they asked, "What is Putney now?" These days, they concluded, it also includes artists.

So we tied the two together—the agricultural traditions and the importance of art in the town of Putney today. Why do artists come to Putney? Because it's beautiful and inspiring, because they can experience all four seasons. So we worked the seasons into the theme, too. And while rural murals are very different from urban murals, the cultures share interesting similarities. For example, while painting the Mystic Mural all of these years with urban youth, I have discovered that there is an enormous presence of nature in urban areas. You just have to look more closely and carefully. Also many urban youth are recent immigrants from countries where they lived in very rural areas.

So they often have a very strong sense of an agricultural and natural past, similar to many of the students at Putney. This project gave students a chance to dig deeply into this community's history, and to connect with the town in new ways. It was a rich and educational experience for all of us.

The mural is focused on the town of Putney, its history, and culture. Seasons change through the panels, with each season separated by a tree. You see swimming at the culvert, maple sugaring, cross-country skiing, and the apple harvest. It includes sheep-shearing, sculpture, the general store, dancers, music, and wool-spinning. I spent about eight hours at the Putney Historical Society one day, scanning photos of life in Putney from years ago. We worked those images into the mural. For example, the community parade in the mural includes the people who played a big role in the town of Putney.

I graduated in the 1960s and it was great to be back and to experience Project Week. One of our painters, Jon Erik, had walked a heifer during a previous Project Week, an idea completely new to me (see Farm Page, page 5 for a story on the heifer stroll). Jon Erik was eager to put himself walking the heifer into the mural, and it's in there. The school was founded on a farm, and, when I was a student, people didn't pay as much attention to the farm; that has changed now, and it was quite wonderful to see how excited kids are about the farm.