

Alumni Spotlight: Barbara Suplee '83



Biographical Information:

I was born in Philadelphia and moved to Norwood, PA at the end of 6th grade. From the time I was a little, I always wanted to be an art teacher, but the oldest of eight children with an out-of-work father, that was not to be. Instead of going to college, Bell Telephone called and I became a “draftsman,” something I enjoyed doing at the time, because I was drawing on maps, using symbols and lines to mark locations of telecommunications equipment in Delaware County. However, I never lost sight of my dream to be an art teacher, not even when I married and had two children.

Professional Information:

Presently, I am a Professor of Art Education at the University of the Arts. The past 23 years have been fulfilling and extremely rewarding. They have taken me on a journey that has enabled me to grow as an individual and art educator—and to see my students grow, also. It is wonderful doing something one really loves...but then to be honored for doing that is incredible! When I received both the Beverly Levett Gerber Special Needs Art Educator Lifetime Achievement Award and the Richard C. von Hess Faculty Prize for Outstanding Commitment as a Teacher and Mentor in 2008, I was truly stunned and honored. Then, in 2013, the Pennsylvania Art Education Association named me Pennsylvania Outstanding Higher Education Art Educator. West Chester University helped make this all possible. How? It was at West Chester that teachers such as John Baker, Lynn White, Gus Sermas, Richard Blake, and Bernice Shapiro instilled in me the joy of learning, inspired me to be the best I could be, and supported me in reaching my goals.

What made you choose the field of education?

When our youngest was still in diapers I started taking one class a semester at West Chester, and my goal was to get a BFA in painting and drawing. I chose West Chester because, although it did not have an Art Education program, it had an excellent Art Department and was close enough for me to commute from my home in Newtown Square. In classes, I was always the oldest student, but that did not bother me because I was learning and loving it! However, taking one course a semester was slow

going and I wanted to finish my degree more quickly...because I had plans for the future, and earning my BFA would bring me one step closer to my goal. Therefore, at the end of my sophomore year, I happily, yes happily, enrolled as a full time student at WC (it was a West Chester State College then) and in 1983, two years later, finally graduated.

What do you think your biggest achievement in your career is?

My greatest accomplishment at UArts would be Service Learning. I initiated Service Learning at UArts to give our pre-service students a richer, deeper hands-on experience in teaching, particularly with special needs students. Special needs populations have always been of great interest for me—for I am what today is labeled “gifted with disabilities.” For years I tried to hide the fact that I am ADD and have learning disabilities, but seeing how design thinking promotes higher order thinking and creative problem solving for diverse learning styles and modes of intelligence. I established partnerships with schools, community centers, and health care facilities to bring art to children at risk and in schools where art is often not a part of the curriculum, e.g., Widener Memorial School (special education center), St. Lucy's Day School for Children with Visual Impairments, The Elwyn School (special education facility), Chester Arthur Elementary School, M.E. Stanton Elementary School, Ken-Crest Early Intervention Center, West Park Cultural and Opportunity Center, Fairmount Early Intervention Center, among others.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

During the past nine years, one of my teaching goals has been to develop students as potential leaders, to challenge emerging teachers to add to the body of knowledge in our field. This has proven successful, because many of my former students are active in our field's professional organizations—both at the state and national levels. Moreover, many of my current students have co-presented workshops with me at PAEA and NAEA conferences—and they have done an excellent job! This fall two of my current students and one recent graduate co-presented with me at the PAEA conference in Seven Springs, PA. Those same students, along with two others, will be co-presenting with me at the NAEA conference in New Orleans. I am extremely proud of their dedication to personal growth and their willingness to share the knowledge and skills they have gained in our program with colleagues in the field. They exemplify what is desired of tomorrow's leaders in art education.

Have you ever had a career-changing experience?

In the fall of 2006, I stepped down as chair of the art department, relinquishing my administrative duties to return to my first loves—full time teaching and making art, which at the moment happens to be clay monoprints. My years at UArts have been wonderful! They have enabled me to teach in a discipline I love, to teach students who are eager to learn and who want to make a difference in children's lives in and through art. Teaching at UArts has also enabled me to be a lifelong learner. When I first came to UArts, I had an inquiry-based, constructivist approach to teaching, something I still embrace. I definitely lean towards the “guide on the side” model of education, rather than the “sage on the stage” model. Now, however, my teaching also emphasizes the integration of digital technology to research, design, and present educational curricula. Many of our students are much more proficient with this medium than I am. Therefore, it allows them to teach me, and their less technologically proficient classmates, which provides a wonderful opportunity for peer teaching.

How has your WCU education contributed to your success?

Looking back, the courses I loved and learned the most in at WCU were art classes, classes taught by John Baker, Lynn White, Gus Sermas, Richard Blake, and Bernice Shapiro. They gave me a strong foundation for my next step, which was teaching K-9 Art at Penn Christian Academy in Norristown. At the end of my year at Penn Christian, which I really loved, I enrolled in Tyler's Master of Education with a Major in Art (MEd) at Temple University, because I wanted a master's degree and licensure to teach art. My studio cognate at Temple was photography.

What advice would you give a current student who aspires to follow in your footsteps and pursue a similar career path?

The moral to this is: "It's never too late to go to school." and "Never give up!"

What is your favorite memory of WCU?

I understand that John Baker is retiring this year, and he will be greatly missed, for during his time at WCU, he has impacted many, many lives in untold ways. He certainly did so for me! Believe it or not, I still have two vessels I made in one of his classes nearly three decades ago: a coil pot lantern based on an antique Iranian lantern and a slab construction lantern. I cherish them and every time I see them, I think of John and silently thank him for fanning the flame he saw in me as an artist and artist educator. And I thank West Chester for starting me on the journey of my life!