

June King McFee Award Presentation

2009 NAEA Conference/Minneapolis

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I want to thank all of you for this great honor. The June King McFee Award is a singular honor most highly regarded and, I can assure you, most highly appreciated among art educators, including myself. I especially want to thank Read Diket, the chair of the Women's Caucus, for her friendship, inspiration, and support for many years.

Before I begin, I must tell you, Peter Smith and I always came to these award presentations of the Women's Caucus. We agreed that these were by far the best speeches. Peter is retired now, so he doesn't attend the NAEA conferences anymore, but I am sure I can see him way back there in the last row, chuckling to himself. I know I have a high standard to meet.

On with it... On the corkboard above my desk there is a quotation from the introduction of June King McFee's *Preparation for Art*. It's been there for at least 20 years. I keep it there because it reminds me of something very important about doing research. McFee's quote begins:

"I well remember the Saturday spent in my office where the Perception-Delineation theory took form after months of study. It was an experience as Maslow describes and as I had experienced many times as a painter, when through intuition based on much preparation, the facts of a whole go together. I owe much to Pauline Sears whose

challenges helped me to get the dissertation written. At the oral exam, chaired by a philosophy of education professor who asked all the questions, I passed with honors. Also the day I graduated I had a call from a new publishing company asking me to write a book based on my dissertation. Somehow they had seen a copy.”

Embedded in the middle of McFee’s quote, there is that sentence, “I owe much to Pauline Sears *whose challenges helped me get the dissertation written.*” **This reminds us if we want to do good research, first, make good friends.** Nobody does good research alone. And I have been blessed with the best of friends—*brilliant* friends—at each step in my career. If you are very, very lucky, as I have been, your friends will also be collaborators in your research. They critique your ideas in their infancy, when the ideas are still weak and vulnerable, but they do it with sympathy and kindness, so as not to kill them in their cradles. They speak the same language; they know what you are talking about, even when you are incoherent. They help you make connections while things are still ricocheting around randomly in your head. In a word, friends are essential for researchers.

I grew up in a small, Norman-Rockwell-like village in central New York State where children had free range to explore, discover, and generally speaking, have a pretty good time. I was a spacey kid. The comment on my report cards generally read, “Always day dreaming.” My mother was the elementary school librarian—hence, my love of books. My father worked in a factory and built the first Univac computers. He had a barber shop on the side, where he cut (sculpted) people’s hair—hence, my artistic ability.

In the fifties, when I was in elementary school, schools didn't randomly assign kids to teachers; they intentionally placed kids with teachers with whom they could do well. In my school, there were three teachers at each grade level. Each of them, of course, taught all the subjects, but one emphasized math and science, one specialized in literature and history, and one favored art and music. Each year I managed to end up with the teacher who favored art and music. (I realized years later that my mother, a faculty member with some clout, had more than a little to do with that. She knew I loved to draw and that this Brer Rabbit needed just such artsy briar patches.) At this point, I should say how my life was deeply influenced by my high school art teacher, but I can't. I took only one art course as a sophomore and didn't get very much out of it. I did continue to draw on my own. I also read a lot of the classics in high school which gave me an edge on scholarship tests which tend to favor trivial facts and literature.

I did my undergraduate work at Syracuse University and eventually went to New York to become a rich and famous artist. There I met Will Barnet, the painter, who put me on to a job with Seymour Lipton, the sculptor. I became one of his assistants and learned his unique technique of brazing on Monel metal.

The first job I had when I went to New York was as a welfare caseworker for the Department of Social Services, not exactly what my degree in painting has prepared me for. However, they were hiring and I needed a job. The interviewer said, "Do you have a college degree?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You're hired. What's your name?" My case load was on 146th Street in the middle of Harlem. For a corn-fed kid from dairy country,

working as a welfare caseworker in New York City was an eye-opener. I saw a side of life that I could never have imagined. My clients, far from the assumptions made about them, were the hardest working people I have ever met. Of course, it was all off the books but they were always scrounging for jobs, and tough jobs at that; welfare was more about benefits than anything else.

If becoming a rich and famous artist was Plan A, it quickly became apparent that I needed a Plan B. I applied to NYU, Hunter College, and Pratt Institute. It turned out Seymour Lipton, for whom I was brazing metal, was on the boards of all three schools, so I was accepted at all three. I enrolled in the art education program at NYU and met Jerry Hausman and David Ecker, two men who were very influential to me. I am sure most of their graduate students were practicing teachers already, but Jerry and David seemed to understand where I was coming from (or perhaps, where I was not coming from) and set me on the right track. David suggested that I go on for a PhD. I liked the university life so it sounded good to me.

Penn State turned out to be the perfect choice. **This was the early seventies and the faculty there has chosen the path less traveled—namely, qualitative research.** If I had gone to a school that emphasized rigorous, quantitative research, I surely would not have survived. I remember standing in the hall of Chambers Building. Someone had told me I needed to pick a dissertation topic by the end of the week, and I was sorting through the options in my mind: Curriculum: no, I knew nothing about that. Assessment: heavens, no, that was unthinkable. Exhibitions: well, I had worked in a museum but not at the

exhibition end. Surveys: how boring! Semiotics: interesting but way too vast. Aesthetics: well, that had possibilities but what angle? I had recently come across this phenomenon called “synesthesia,” so eventually I cobbled together an aesthetic theory incorporating synesthesia. I mention these other topics that I rejected—curriculum, assessment, exhibition, surveys, and semiotics—because they became things that I have pursued in the last three decades. Synesthesia, although an interest, I never followed up on.

I said that good friends make good research. Ten years ago, I attended an NAEA session at the Washington conference about grant opportunities related to the **1997 NAEP Report Card for the Visual Arts**. There were about 15 people there but after the session, only three remained, Read Diket, Bob Sabol, and myself. Applying for the grant would have been beyond our individual capacities (except for Read, of course), but together we thought we might be able to tackle it. After some ado, we received the grant to conduct a secondary analysis of the NAEP data. Read did a factor analysis of the data; Bob, a regional analysis, and I made a quartile analysis. My point is, while our three analyses were different, they were complementary. I don’t think any of us could have done it without the other two. Each of us contributed to understanding what the data was all about, and how we could look at it. I think that is what good research is about, and it is something we should strive for.

I have been at Virginia Commonwealth University for the last 31 years where I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of wonderful students, dozens of provocative

colleagues, and five delightful chairpersons, including Dan Reeves, Betty Tisinger, Charles Bleick, Steve Carpenter, and now, Pam Taylor. Again, friends are essential.

Several years ago, I published a book called *Exhibiting Student Art*. (You may have heard of it.) The premise is that students should learn to exhibit their own art; it is part of the artistic process. Moreover, I don't think it is the teacher's job to exhibit their art for them. The teacher's job is to teach. Of course, that includes teaching them to exhibit. There are great benefits to exhibiting but you will have to read the book to find out all about them. I am happy that the book has met with some small success.

Seven years ago I married my best friend, Theresa. She is here with us today. We just celebrated our seventh anniversary. Terry is an art teacher. Every day she brings home stories from school that I can pass along to my students as inspirational examples but also as cautionary tales. She has brought so much joy into my life.

So that brings me full circle in my adventure in art education. **After 40 years in art education, I leave you with one thought: If we want to do good work, first, make good friends.** I deeply appreciate this wonderful honor that you have bestowed on me. Thank you.