

Mary Rouse Award
Acceptance Speech

Dr. Kristin Congdon's speech on the acceptance of her Mary Rouse Award reminds us that education comes to us through a lifetime of experience and our willingness to be open to those experiences and to interpret, examine, and learn from them and to then, as teachers/students, share them with others, through our words and deeds. She reminds us that the personal is political. In the following transcript, Kristin shares with us much that we can learn from. We are very happy to be able to share this acceptance speech with those who were unable to attend last year's awards ceremonies as well as remind those who were there of this significant sharing of experience.

Kathy Connors
REPORT Editor

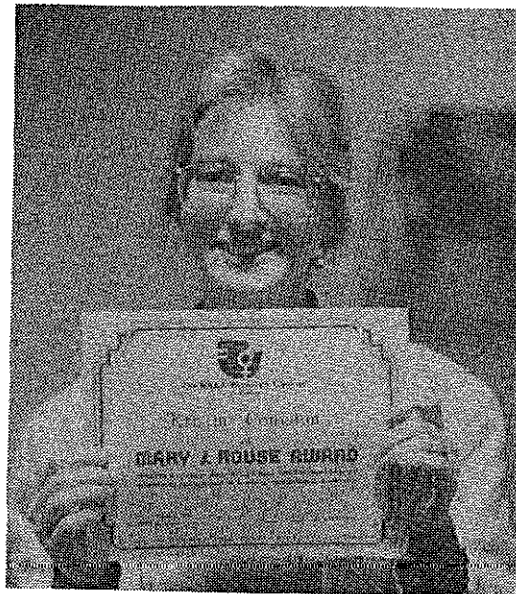
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Kristin G. Congdon
The William and Alice Jenkins
Endowed Chair in Community Arts

I am honored to have received the nomination for this award from both Karen Hambien and Nancy Johnson. Karen has been a close friend of mine since the early 1980s when I began to supervise student teachers at the University of Oregon under her guidance. Ever since that time I have looked to Karen as a mentor as well as a good friend. Unfortunately, I was just getting to know Nancy shortly before she died. I had been acquainted with her work for many years and had always been impressed with the determination and energy she put into the Social Theory Caucus. Last Spring I was able to spend some time with Nancy and Karen at Louisiana State University and it was then that I vowed to make an effort to spend more time with Nancy personally. I deeply regret that I was unable to follow through with this wish. This award is extremely special to me because it comes from Karen, Nancy, and the women's Caucus.

I am told that one uses these award speeches to talk about oneself and those people, things, and events which have been most influential. I have always seen my academic career as an

extension of the rest of my life. Certain experiences I have had in my life have stuck with me and have influenced my teaching and my writing.

I was born in Boston. My father was an engineer and a career man in the navy. He was trained at several prestigious schools: Annapolis and MIT. He also did work at Johns Hopkins and was a member of the planning commission for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He was not your stereotypical engineer. He was a cub scout leader and a Sunday School teacher; he loved to play horseshoes, baseball, football, and basketball. He even set up Saturday activities for all the neighborhood children at our house when we lived in Maryland. He wanted kids to be programmed positively. Unfortunately, my father died suddenly and tragically in 1960. I was eleven. He left four children and my mother, who was 6 months pregnant with her



fifth child.

My mother is a Lutheran minister. She became one in her later years, long after my father had died and most of my siblings had left the house for school or independent living. When

she got her masters in divinity from Harvard, with honors, she was almost the oldest person who had ever gotten the masters in divinity from that school. This is a distinction she enjoys. Brinkley Goranson came from a very small town in North Carolina, where everyone is related. As far as I know, she was always determined, intelligent, and fiercely independent.

We moved a lot, before my father died, as military families do. During my elementary years, I received good grades and encouragement for my art work. In 1960, we moved to Virginia Beach to settle. It was somewhat of a sleepy little town then, with no Holiday Inns. The hotels were mostly small, family owned, and painted colors like pink and purple. I was immediately placed in a high school which had grades 8 through 12. All my classes were advanced level and many were classes for 9th graders. It was then that I lost interest in my school work. I ate my lunch in science class, instead of taking notes; I listened to the radio with my ear plug when I could; and I began to learn how to skip classes, coerce grades from teachers, and slide by with "C's" and often "D's". I was not seen as a trouble maker, just someone who didn't apply herself. But this is not to tell you that I wasn't learning.

I was greatly affected by the "For Colored Only" signs I saw repeatedly throughout Virginia and North Carolina. My classmates and I were amazed to learn, in my senior year, when our school had its first Black students, that their neighborhood was only blocks from my school. We had been oblivious to this fact because no roads around our neighborhoods led us in that direction. I was disillusioned and angry when I found out that, as a matter of open, spoken principle, the government teacher flunked every Black student in her class at least once because she believed that all "coloreds" needed to take her class at least twice. I was even more affected to learn that this attitude was not challenged by anyone. I knew that no black people swam on our beaches, despite their close proximity to our boardwalk. And I remember watching one summer, in the late 60's, when two Black men swam as far as they could, down the length of ocean front. White people pulled their children out of the water and gasped in disbelief. I was learning about race.

I also remember vividly wondering about my options as a female. I looked for role models. As a small child, I knew that the hardball had to be exchanged for a softball when I came out to play baseball, and I knew my brothers and the male neighborhood children resented having to play sports with "the girls". As a teenager, I watched my brother freely drive around at night, and I became keenly aware of my mother's special requests (indeed, demands) that I drive at night with the doors locked and our German Sheppard dog leaning over my shoulder. Since I baby-sat a lot around the neighborhood for extra money, I imagined myself becoming the mothers I worked for. I saw little but the supportive wife and mother and fiercely wondered what other options I had as a female. I knew my careers could include: teacher (I hated school), nurse (I hated sickness and wasn't a particularly a good support person), stewardess (airplanes scared me), or an artist (but a female artist, I realized must, by my lack of role models, be something more of a homemaker than a Picasso or a Matisse). I was learning about gender.

When I was in first grade, a school friend asked me if our family was rich or poor. I responded that I didn't know and that night asked my father, "Are we rich or poor?" He said we were neither, we were in the middle. I was greatly relieved, for I thought the responsibility of either alternatives might be too difficult. However, as my father became a ship Commander and later a Captain, I was very cognizant of the fact that when we went on HIS ship EVERYONE stood at attention, saluted, and made a big fuss over me. My father had made me special. He continued to tell me that we were not special, not better than, not out of the ordinary, but somehow there were indications to tell me differently. In my teenage years, I knew that I was invited to dances and parties that others could not attend, and I was keenly aware of my social status as one who came from a "good family." Although my father had died, his reputation followed my family. Although we had little spending money, we lived in a safe, desirable neighborhood. My home was at the "better" end of the Beach, whereas the poorer economic classes lived at the south end. We did not have much money in those days, but in Virginia, family reputations and the location of your home gave identity. I was learning

about class.

When I graduated from high school, as a disappointing student, I was accepted by Valparaiso University, a Lutheran school, because of the strong influence of several ministers with whom my mother had connections. As my brothers were winning awards and scholarships from private schools, and entering MIT and Brandeis, my mother was saying prayers that I would stay put and get at least two years of college before I went off in some other direction. My first week at Valparaiso I was to learn that I had been accepted into college in a special program for underachievers. There were 10 of us who were to take light academic loads and receive special counseling. Being in this program phased me little. I had always been under the impression that I could do whatever I wanted to do when I decided to do it. This had been confirmed by a psychologist (of course) who had given me a full battery of tests. So, I consciously decided that what other students did, I could do in much less time. Filled with wonder and awe at my new found college freedom, I decided to party, and to go out five nights a week and study two. (My love for fieldwork is, no doubt, an extension of this desire to find knowledge in places other than books and classrooms). My first semester's grade average was .66 and I was devastated. My comp teacher gave me exactly what I had earned, a "D", despite the fact that I carried the class conversations, and was noticeably one of his favorite students. Likewise, my sociology professor condemned me for missing classes, sleeping in the back row, and being totally disinterested. My concern over my grades only lasted until I realized that I had barely escaped academic probation and that the computer models said I would do a bit worse. Therefore, I modified my social life, but only slightly. My grades steadily (but slowly) rose as I continued as a student at Valparaiso. And my interest in classroom studies slowly, but surely followed. What became more important to me was the civil rights movement, community activism, and the marches taking place in Chicago. I was engaged to be married in my senior year, and my fiance, David, was working with a building group to racially integrate our town. He was also working as a community organizer in Chicago to stop high rise, low

income housing, and discourage big business from taking land owned by economically poor people. We were close to the workings of the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Young Patriots, and we used to hear Jesse Jackson speak at Operation Breadbasket on Saturday mornings. These were strong influences on my life and work. They continued to build on my experiential learning about race, class, and gender.

My first teaching experience, in fact, my first education class, was in Spring of 1970, my last semester at Valparaiso. (Before that time, I had concentrated my studies in Art, philosophy, and sociology). It was a practicum class, and I volunteered to go teach in an innercity junior high school in Gary, Indiana. I failed miserably at the experience; in fact, my first teaching presentation resulted in a gang fight with the rest of the class cheering. Nevertheless, the experience hooked me into teaching. I was already devoted to the populations I still care most about: those people who are most overlooked and neglected by our society.

My husband and I moved to Bloomington, Indiana, after I graduated from Valparaiso, where I was able to enroll in the graduate program in art education while working on my teaching certification. It was this program which finally gave me an interest in academic study. I worked with Guy Hubbard and Jessie Lovano-Kerr. These people helped me focus and gave me purpose. Sadly, though Mary Rouse was there, she was on leave and I was only to meet with her once for advising later in my program. Teaching became important to me as a way to transform people's lives, as a way to present choices, and as a way to define and utilize the strengths and artistic expressions that can come from all groups of people.

I have learned much from the many groups of students I have taught, who have also taught me. The innercity elementary children in the public schools of Fort Wayne, Indiana, taught me how special art is to children, how it feels to be a minority as I was in their school and community, and all about living in and amongst a different culture. These schools made me question the use of paddling as punishment; the incredible overload an art teacher takes on;

and the seeming futility of trying to be someone special to 1800 kids in three different schools. I also learned my discomfort with school systems was still with me: The feeling of imprisonment, the lack of independence, the inability to have time to breath creatively, and the incredible inflexibility of school schedules. By the time the weather got nice, I felt just as frustrated as my students. I wanted desperately to get into a Chevy Van and travel the country.

We moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I was determined to see what else I could do with a master's degree in art education. I readily found work in the Milwaukee Art Center on Saturdays and during summers. This position offered me support and resources, more time with students, and a freedom to push the limits of creativity. I loved teaching there -- but I also missed working with the kinds of kids I had had in Fort Wayne: economically poor kids who most needed choices, positive, identifiable role models, and opportunity.

At the same time, I was fortunate enough to be able to teach women inmates in the Milwaukee County jail -- a job I held for two and a half years. This position allowed me to explore art education in a way that was totally different from anything I had learned before. Ideas about art concepts, materials, projects, art history, and so forth, all had to be reanalyzed. I had to let my students do much of the teaching and teach me they did. I learned about their incredible strength to survive; their ability to learn, to contribute, to create in the most adverse settings. I learned that they had a way of knowing about the world I had not yet seen, a way of talking about it that was foreign to me; and a value system that was in many ways as admirable as any I had known before. More than anything, I learned about myself. And again I was struck by the importance of race, gender, and class. It made a difference in the justice system, and it made a big difference in the style, content, and structure of my art classroom.

I had other important experiences in Milwaukee which time will not allow me to talk about in much detail. I became the principal of a school for emotionally disturbed adolescent girls who were pregnant, high risks for a premature pregnancy or already had

children living apart from them. It was in a residential treatment center. Because PL 94-142 was so new, the properly credentialed people were not available for the job. I performed the duties that someone with a doctorate in Special Education should have. After I left this position, I started the Foster Grandparent Program in Milwaukee County. I quickly learned how viable a resource older adults were and how much they could help in solving so many of our nation's problems.

In January of 1981 my husband and I moved to Eugene, Oregon, so that I could work on my doctorate. I knew I needed more education. I also knew I needed time to reflect and make sense of the experiences I had had. I asked David to leave our home, a good job, and travel across the country so that I could study with June King McFee and Vincent Lanier. I knew that my interests in folk art, in oppressed groups of people, and in a cultural approach to teaching, meant my best bet was to study at the University of Oregon. David found a good job in mental health there and we moved. These were meaningful, special years for me. I had the freedom, the support, and the community I needed, not just from the facility, but also from my peers in the doctoral program who will always be thought of as good friends. In Oregon, I discovered the writings of Graeme Chalmers and I met and became influenced by Rogena Degge, Bev Jones, and others. My three years there were good years and I left Oregon with a sadness that it was over, and a knowledge that I would miss the countryside and the rain.

My first academic job at Bowling Green State University must be mentioned because it was there that I met and began working with Doug Blandy. Our first semester together we argued over several issues as we were team teaching a class in art for special populations. But we readily found out we were interested in many of the same ideas; we liked reading the same books; and we complemented each other's strengths and weaknesses. Throughout the years we have worked on many projects together and I am sure this collaboration will continue in the future. I have learned a tremendous amount from Doug -- especially why it is so important to take time to know and include people experiencing disabilities into

normalized art programming. He has introduced me to several friends and co-workers of his and my life has only been enriched. In addition, Doug reads profusely, thereby continually leading me in new directions, and he sends me clippings from the New York Times every single week. I can count on it.

I am fortunate now to hold an Endowed Chair position in Community Arts at the University of Central Florida, where I am able to develop a specialized program which encourages the facilitation of arts programs (in the visual arts, music, theatre, and creative writing) which come from the strengths and creative expressions of people who have traditionally been overlooked and neglected.

I have tried to focus on some of the most important influences in my life: especially the awareness of the [effect] that race, class, and gender has had on my life decisions and my work. However, there is one more thing which I would like to highlight and that is the importance of support. When Karen Hamblen gave her acceptance speech for the Mary Rouse Award she spoke about the support many women don't have in our field, which is little different from other academic fields of study I am sure. I would like to quote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who quoted Victor Hugo, saying:

If a soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he [or she] who commits the sin, but he [or she] who causes the darkness.

It is hard to reach a dream, indeed it is sometimes hard to formulate a dream, unless you have a supportive environment. My ideas, my choices, my moves, and my projects, have often caused conflict and sometimes dissension. I have made some choices and asked for support and direction where others might have thought it unwise. But I have always found enough support to make the things I believe in happen, at least to some degree. When I was a child I was often told that there was no money for a dress I wanted, or for restaurants or movies, but I was never told that money could not be found for travel, art lessons, or someone who would tell me that what I wanted could be done. People like June King McFee, Vincent Lanier, Rogena Degge, Doug Blandy, Guy Hubbard, Karen

Hamblen, and many, many others have given me support when I needed it. But my greatest support has come from my husband of 19 years, David, a strong feminist, who moved me, helped me pay my tuition, read over my papers, put up with my frequent traveling and believes with me in the importance of empowering disenfranchised groups of people and allowing all people's voices to be heard, especially those who have been oppressed because of race, gender, class, and as Doug Blandy has made me acutely aware, x disability. My work will continue to attempt to make visible those who will not be "disappeared" from our society as equal partners in the development of art education policy and practice.

This award is very special. I thank you.