

Ruth Starratt

2012 Maryl Fletcher De Jong Service Award

Let me begin by saying I remember always using art materials from the time I was a little girl. I walked to my neighborhood K-8 school and was one of a class of 13 who moved from year to year together. All of our grade level teachers were responsible for teaching the entire curriculum, but there were few art activities. Only when I got to high school was I able to elect art classes, but because I played flute and piccolo in the orchestra and the marching band my elective choices were seriously limited. Art was the subject I wanted to explore, but for the most part I had to create on my own.

My longing for artistic mentors began to be answered in the summer of my 16th year. By some miracle, my father agreed to let me spend two weeks studying painting at the Provincetown Workshop on Cape Cod. Helen Frankenthaler was my teacher with the added bonus that her husband Robert Motherwell would stop by the studio. We endlessly doused unprimed canvas with turpentine washes....to this day, I love that smell.

I grew up listening to my parents share their days through school stories. My father, a high school teacher and an assistant principal, died much too young, leaving Mother, a fifth grade teacher, alone to share her daily stories. It is not surprising that I decided to become a teacher too. I took evening part-time classes working a dual major in art and English literature. My BA took eleven years to complete.

I was fortunate to graduate in the late 60's at a time when art education jobs in Connecticut were abundant. I happily found myself trying to decide between five towns that had each offered me a position. Wouldn't my current grad students love to face that problem this May? I finally chose Wilton, CT, a culturally rich bedroom town for NYC and taught art there the next three decades. Mother continued to teach into her 70's and after her retirement I, her only child, could always entertain her with

stories from the art room. She, in turn, would offer wonderful pieces of teacher wisdom. Thinking back all these years later I cannot imagine my early years of teaching without her wise guidance. She was my mother and my mentor.

In the spring of my first year teaching art, over 40 years ago, I traveled to my first NAEA conference, and each subsequent year naturally led to deep professional friendships, and, of course, to the Women's Caucus. We were the Flower Teachers so the clothing and jewelry worn by the participants were a show unto themselves. For example, Bob Saunders, a great fan of the Women's Caucus would arrive with his latest tie dyed wardrobe. Art education was celebrated in every way and so it continues to this day.

A few more degrees later, still going part time, I receive an acceptance from Columbia University to dual major once again, but this time in art education and the pre-history art of Oceania covering one-third of the globe's surface. My school breaks and the summer provided the time for the world travels that began to support my doctoral research. Since the 80's so many extraordinary world-wide educators have become part of my life; it would take days to tell their stories. Many work in conditions that are hard to imagine, yet education continues because of their dedication to teaching. Their work is heroic, but unheralded.

Sometimes I have to travel alone to remote regions of the world, pre-historic art is rarely found in easy places, and sometimes I am privileged have the companionship of my husband, an amazing professor and author in his own right. We have one problem....he does teach at the enemy camp, Boston College, a fierce athletic rival of my Boston University. That said, he is always supportive of my work as an educator and as an artist, witnessed by his presence here tonight. Bless you and thank you, beloved husband.

Seated with him are my oldest son and daughter-law. This very son, when he was feeling youthful revenge shouted out “Why can’t you be like OTHER mothers?” what can I say??? sorry Rick.

I want to close by explaining how much more than the obvious reasons of gratitude this award means to me. Maryl and I met many decades ago through INSEA. The friendship deepened over the years and the time between conferences was filled with letters. Maryl was a great letter writer. She was a devoted friend and a superb educator. She was talented and funny. She delighted making all her friends crazy by filling her cards and letters with glittery confetti that would stick to everything especially the carpet. She lived to serve and the organizations that were privileged to count her a member got so much.

She loved to dance. Years ago attendance at the World Congress of Art found us both in Montreal. The final gala banquet had a big swing band playing and Maryl shared her love of dance with my husband. He shared that his wife had two left feet. That was it. Out they went and proceeded to dance the night away. The joy on her face and the lightness of her dancing feet is one of those great memories.

She was a magnificent woman, a great friend, and with this award she continues to touch my life once again.

Thank you.