

ENACTING CHANGE SURVEY RESPONSE

For information on the Enacting Change Survey Project, facilitated by Joanna Rees, see the NAEA Women's Caucus website at <http://naeawc.net/activism.html>

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August 25, 2009

The purpose of my career was to be there for students, for them to study and make artwork that helped them understand their own and others' lives. My career began as an art teacher in Worthington, Ohio in the early 1970s. I taught art at a high school building for just ninth graders, for six years; in the middle was a year of maternity leave. It was a small school and the teachers knew all the students and cared about the kids and how we taught them. My husband was an experienced teacher at the same school who helped mentor me and support my rather independent style of teaching. When I had two children, in 1980, I quit teaching to be home with them. Also because my now part-time salary was very low and childcare was difficult to find.

In 1976, while still teaching, I had decided to get my Masters degree from Ohio State University in Art Education. Right before I started my first class I discovered I was pregnant with my first child. In 1981, I graduated a month after my third child was born. At the graduation ceremony I had a military escort help me on the stage because I had just had a Cesarean section. My memory of parenting, teaching, and being a grad student is that it was a blob of interconnected activity in a "however you can get though it kind of way."

Within a couple of months after graduation, I was asked to teach a course at The Ohio State University College of Dentistry. This lasted, off and on, for several years. I taught "Perceptual Drawing Skills" to dental students based on (2001) *The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, to offer a different approach to spatial skill development for students needing extra help. In addition, I later taught a series of dental aesthetics classes, as the Dean felt most of the dental students were white male and European. He wanted a multicultural curricular approach to help students become more aware of the aesthetics of the face. These were innovative courses that a couple of special people thought up and I designed and piloted. However, the College of Dentistry eventually lost funding for these ancillary classes and my time there was terminated.

One year, I taught pre-school. This experience helped me develop the humane disciplinary approaches that I used with future students and formed the basis of my (2005) book *Teaching Difficult Students: Blue Jays in the Classroom*. Following this experience (because of low wages), I went back to public school and taught middle school part-time. In this middle school I was unhappy with how my colleagues treated each other. I defended a

student during a team conference and also called Children's Services over a child who was in danger of sexual abuse and I got in trouble for that.

Then I got hired to teach at a really fine public high school. I taught at this school but was laid off at the end of the first year—even though I was told I was “a dream.” The kids wrote a petition with 100 signatures to try to keep me from being let go. I was hired back the next year, having to travel between 2 elementary schools, teach 2 high school classes and work on the yearbook. Then I was laid off again. Replaced (very) part-time by a male swimming coach.

It was traumatic for me to be out of work, so I went through the phonebook, calling every place in town that was a school. I was hired part-time at another suburban district to teach at two “magnet schools.” In this district, art was regarded as providing planning time for classroom teachers. There was a comment made by a teacher that “I wish they would do more cute projects in the art class.” I was doing intercultural projects that pushed students to consider cultures and heritage and projects that encouraged students to think creatively. After two years I was increased to full time by teaching at the two elementary schools and a high school. I had a half an hour to commute from one elementary school to the high school, eat lunch, and do all my planning. The next year they changed my assignment to two new elementary schools and no high school – my forte. I went to the Personnel Director to talk to him about staying at the high school. He wouldn't even talk to me about it and told me to leave the building. Then the next year they decided to change all the art teacher assignments again, shortening our classes to 35 minutes, no time between classes, and some “art on a cart.” I decided that I couldn't teach that way. I gave up a full-time salary and tenure to start over somewhere else.

I went back to my original district for the opportunity to work somewhere that would support my teaching and pedagogy. After two years I became Department Chair and had a very supportive and student-centered principal. I used to say I was “teaching in Heaven.” But he stepped down and was replaced with a female principal, whom some consider a sociopath. For instance, she harassed a teacher (who had a Ph.D.) to the point that the teacher consulted with an attorney and almost filed a civil rights case. Another female teacher pursuing a Ph.D. left in the middle of the year because of harassment.

This principal tried to force me to leave the school, maybe because I was outspoken and a student advocate. I was also studying for my doctorate at this point. No one would stand up for me in the upper administration. Eventually the principal left and I stayed there for the rest of fourteen years. I decided to retire after another principal screamed at me. Part of my unhappiness on the job may have had to do with being a woman. I am five foot two and have felt that if I was a big man people would have listened to what I had to say. Some colleagues could be very dismissive. Some male staff members would interrupt and cut me off or hardly speak to me in the halls. I perceive this has to do with being a little woman. Maybe I was too forceful or loud or strong or outspoken. I think that if I had kept my mouth shut I would have had less trouble. But then I wouldn't have been fulfilled in my need to try to make schools kinder places for students.

As an educator I tried to help kids. I thought I was at least planting seeds so that when these kids were independent adults they could make their lives better. The personal connection with my students was the reward of my teaching. I loved my students, in a teacher way, and know that sometimes I changed lives. My students did quality artwork and we talked at high levels.

In my last district there is a lot of support for the arts - all the elementary schools have self-contained art rooms and certified art teachers. Art classes are built into the curriculum. Yet, still there is not an understanding of the value and potential of the arts. I have sensed a power struggle between the Social Studies or Science Departments and the Art Department, which seemed to be considered not as academically important. Even amongst my colleagues, I often felt I needed to prove myself. Finally I gave up trying and just did my best with students and endured until I could retire.

It was always a disappointment that the district would not hire specialists or experts from within their own schools and would instead hire more well known individuals from outside the district for thousands of dollars. I thought that having twenty-five years or more of experience and a Ph.D. [from Ohio State University (2001)] in Creativity & Education would give me some credibility for my ideas but many administrators and colleagues seemed kind of put-off by it.

Throughout my career I was able to start programs that were designed to use art to help students with the challenges in their lives. I created a program for behavior prevention through the arts. I was an "Expressive Arts Specialist" who met with students in In-School Suspension. I adapted an art therapy model to help students talk about and identify underlying causes of their behavior problems. This program lasted for a semester and then the superintendent cut the funding. I created and supervised an after-school group called "Creative Mondays" that used art to open conversations with kids about the issues in their personal lives and in the world.

Much of my philosophy of teaching comes from the partnership I shared with my late husband Gary Alan Smith who was an extraordinary coach and changed kids lives through his teaching. He died at 53 and we received condolences from all over the world from former students telling us how much he had impacted and changed their lives. Part of my relationship with him was this mission to change schools and make them more humane. In the last chapter of *Teaching Difficult Students*, I said I realized from Gary's death how extraordinary a teacher's reach is. It extends into the future and around the world. Gary and I shared a mission to make school better for young people.

Since I've retired I've been writing and have an article that just came out in the July 2009 issue of *Art Education*, entitled, "The Potential for Meaning in Student Art." In addition, I've been volunteering at a facility that is part of the Homeless Families Foundation in Columbus. This school was set up by a woman who had lost three of her four children. I volunteer there and do art activities to help kids talk about their lives, similar to what I did in Creative Mondays and the In-School Suspension room. One project was to help kids see

themselves as a gift to the world, draw it and put it in a gift box with a bow. This is a place where I feel appreciated.

A year ago I lost my 29 year old son in a car accident. His name is Tony Smith. Although he was not a certified teacher he ended up teaching kids with serious learning disabilities at two different schools and helped change the teaching and pedagogy at the Jemicy School, outside Baltimore. After he died, the school named their arts festival after my son and created a student reading room, also named after him. His short career demonstrates how important it is to care about students and teach to their needs. I have learned that there are schools whose focus is on students and that welcome new ideas. I wish I could have taught there. We need to teach teachers about non-traditional methods and the importance of their relationships with students.

I had originally planned to teach until I was seventy. But by the time I had my thirty years in I was glad to be done. I wish I could have ended my teaching career with a warm heart and great memories. It's too bad that the profession tends to wring you out. I do remember my students lovingly and am in contact with a few. I kept all of my rosters.

References

Edwards B. (2001) *The new drawing on the right side of the brain*. London: Harper Collins

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