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It’s about Making a Difference

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Engaging students subtly

It was one of those moments that make all the others worthwhile.

During a class critique, Linfield College Art Professor Ron Mills and his students admired an inspired series of paintings by a particularly shy student.

The work stunned the class, and, surprised even the student, but her eyes sparkled with pride and self-confidence that Mills knew would stay with her for years to come.

The moment, along with others throughout his career, confirmed Mills’ commitment to teaching. For his dedication, Mills received the Edith Green Distinguished Professor Award for excellence in teaching and research last spring. The award is made annually to a Linfield faculty member who has demonstrated outstanding performance in teaching and related faculty roles.

“The teaching of art provides opportunities to engage the deepest levels of human development, including my own,” said Mills, the son of a painter who studied under Arshile Gorky.

Surrounded by art and the curiosity of his students, “It was the right choice for me,” said Mills. “I not only get plenty of chances to counsel students through psychology and art therapy, but after coming to Linfield Graduate School, Mills considered studying Jungian California and a master of fine art from Claremont.

Mills has nurtured a successful career as an artist. With a bachelor’s degree from the University of California and a master of fine art from Claremont Graduate School, Mills considered studying Jungian psychology and art therapy, but after coming to Linfield as a visiting artist in 1980, he decided to teach instead. “It was the right choice for me,” said Mills. “I not only get plenty of chances to counsel students through emotional issues related to their art, but I am also able to participate in their intellectual formation.”

Surrounded by art and the curiosity of his students, Mills began showing his art professionally while in graduate school, and has since been featured in dozens of solo and collective exhibits in several countries. He has also painted four murals, one of them in Walker Hall, three in Latin America. He’s working on a new body of notations for solo exhibitions at Linfield and in Oaxaca, Mexico, next year.

And like any good teacher, Mills continues to grow. “What I learned as a rookie I am still learning: that teaching art, beyond simple technical instruction, is really about setting up conditions in which it can happen in a thoughtful and supportive context; that listening is at least as important as eloquent oration; and that good students often have disarmingly creative ways of forcing even seemingly simple matters to be rethought. (The Edith Green Distinguished Professor Panel will be held Friday, Nov. 5, at 7:30 p.m. in Nicholson Library. Panelists include Ron Mills, professor of art; Linda Oles, professor of psychology; and Mike Roberts, professor of biology."

It’s about making a difference

Barbara May’s life has been about making a difference.

In the slums of New Jersey, in battered women’s shelters in Montana and Oregon, and in the classroom, May’s life has been defined by teaching out to the disadvantaged and disenchanted.

She’s taken her three great loves – nursing, research and teaching – and combined them into the perfect profession. In recognition of her accomplishments, she received the Samuel I. Graf Faculty Achievement Award last spring, given each year to a faculty member who has performed some outstanding achievement beyond his or her regular duties.

The nursing profession is about making a difference, May said, and she’s been able to do that in a variety of ways. She’s worked in hospitals and in the community, serving people of different cultures, ages and economic levels. At Montana State University, where she completed her master’s degree, she began her work with battered women, raising grant funds to establish a women’s shelter and collecting data to begin a fledgling research project that has burgeoned into one that is garnering national and international recognition.

“My interest in working with abused women came out of trying to make a difference,” said May, a professor of nursing at the Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing. “How could I help reduce the violence in the world in my own way? I was a child of the 60s and did a lot of volunteer service as a teen. That carried over as an adult. I just feel it’s a value of mine.”

She brought her passion into the classroom when she first started teaching at MSU and found it was a perfect fit.

“I loved it from the beginning,” she said. “I like to get my fingers in a lot of pies and saw that I could do a lot of things – the teaching, the research, the service – it could all fold into one job.”

Her work with abused women continued in Portland at Raphael House and later in Albany at the Linn County Child Victim Assessment Center. She’s now on call with Legacy Health System, and many of the psychiatric consultations she does are with abused women.

“Sharing what she has learned, sharing the stories of what these women have gone through, helps prepare her students for what they will face on the job. Studies show that health care providers are not prepared to deal comfortably or confidently with people who are in abusive situations. “It’s not a matter of ‘if’ they will encounter someone in an abusive situation, it’s ‘when,’” May said.

“I love working with the students,” she added. “They teach me just like I teach them. I don’t have to teach, but for me it very much goes together. I enjoy being able to share my stories. As long as I have more to share, I want to work with students.”

And her research partner, Barbara Limmander, a visiting associate professor of nursing at Linfield, continues to model intervention strategies for abused women’s self-efficacy. Their work, funded by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, is getting noticed nationally and they have even had one inquiry from Iran. Her passion is contagious and bubbles up as she talks about her work.

“I have some kind of internal motivation that propels me forward,” she said. “I love working with my colleagues, I love the students. For me, it’s been more about working with people and in something I feel engaged in and passionate about. I love the college’s philosophy of life-long learning, something I deeply believe in. I keep thinking one of these days I’m not going to have any more ideas, I’m not going to have anything more to give. It hasn’t been true so far.”

–Mardi Mileham