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Storytelling and art combine to help students communicate creatively

By Michael Lollar

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It is Elaine Blanchard's second semester as an adjunct professor at Memphis College of Art. Blanchard is a storyteller and a woman that one art student is convinced "could get along with a brick wall."

Blanchard is best known as a woman who goes beyond some of the biggest walls in the city along with the razor wire atop them to reach out to women in prison, helping to "set them free" by getting them to tell their stories.

She also is a teacher who has taught special education and gifted students at Snowden Elementary School. And she is an ordained minister who teaches classes called "The Preacher As Storyteller" at Memphis Theological Seminary to help future ministers relate to their audiences.

Blanchard's roles as educator and mentor came together at Memphis College of Art last semester when her optional class drew students for the current semester by word-of-mouth. "It's one of those classes that's now in high demand," says Maria Bibbs, the Memphis College of Art teacher who recommended hiring Blanchard as part of a liberal arts curriculum tailored to artists.

"She's electrifying. I love to hear her voice and just to see her coming. She's such a warm and engaging person," says Bibbs, who learned of Blanchard through her volunteer project, "Prison Stories," which has turned Blanchard, 62, into one of the most recognized women in Memphis. It earned her a Jefferson Award, an award from The Commercial Appeal as one of the Twelve Who Made a Difference and a winner of the vision award this year from Women of Achievement.

It will also turn Blanchard into a TV personality next month when WKNO-TV airs a 30-minute documentary about her by Craig Leake, a nine-time Emmy winner who followed and filmed Blanchard's seventh installment of "Prison Stories" for 15 weeks. The documentary will air five times beginning at 9 p.m. Thursday, May 15. In it, Blanchard enlists women to tell their stories, then writes and produces a play based on their hard-luck lives and the misdeeds that landed them in prison.

"Miss Elaine makes you feel like someone ... She gives you hope," says one inmate in Leake's documentary.

When he learned that Blanchard joined the faculty at the College of Art, Leake, who teaches in the department of communication at the University of Memphis, said that whoever hired Blanchard is "very wise. Anytime you see her in a crowd you know people flock to her because they want to talk to her. She's one of those people who makes you feel somehow important. What you say she really wants to hear. That puts her in an ideal position to influence students.

"A student would never feel that, 'Oh, here she comes with her old yellowed notes.' She's got to be a breath of fresh air. If she is encouraging artists to tell their own stories and the stories of their own artwork, wow, you couldn't find anyone better to do that," says Leake.

And that is exactly what the College of Art had in mind, says Bibbs.

Art students may be great artists, but they are not always the most communicative people when it comes to telling the story of their art or learning to play a role in the marketing of art.

Memphis College of Art is focusing on an innovative curriculum that tries to prepare artists for the real world, says Bibbs. It may be one of the few schools, possibly the only one, to employ a storyteller to further that goal.

The class with 16 students this semester is called, appropriately, "The Art of Storytelling," and it helps students learn to build a narrative using elements of theater, writing and performance art that come into play in Blanchard's "Prison Stories." Bibbs had been exposed to a related idea while in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, she says. It was a volunteer project that involved students to help teach African-American studies and creative writing to African-American inmates.

Blanchard's class is not a volunteer project, but it exposes students to the real world through field trips each semester. With Blanchard they visited with homeless people, incarcerated women, adults with developmental disabilities, nursing home residents and men in transitional counseling after long periods of imprisonment. Students talked to members of each group and chose one person to focus on as their individual class project, creating artwork inspired by that person.

Robby McElhane, 22, an illustration major of Franklin, Tenn., said he chose a developmentally disabled man as his project because of the man's ability to constantly find joy in a life that, on the surface, has little to offer. As part of the preparation, he said the class learned from Blanchard to listen. "I think we (the students) would all agree it's had an impact on us." One of Blanchard's major influences, he said, "is just learning to pay attention and to pay attention to details instead of waiting for your turn to speak."

It is one of the reasons why he says Blanchard's class has become one of his favorites and that she "could get along with a brick wall."

Classmate Crystal Foss, 22, a photography major of Seattle, planned to focus on a female inmate and said that one of Blanchard's best lessons was to emphasize "vulnerability. We sat around the classroom for the first five weeks and talked to each other. It gave you a way to be vulnerable. It's like bringing everyone together. It's important to share that vulnerability. It's so easy to censor yourself. Then, it (art) is not really true anymore."

Blanchard often shares part of her own past and how her misogynist father focused on his sons, treating her as an afterthought of little value. She said such painful memories come out in what she calls "conversation" instead of storytelling. "Just look at me. Talk to me about your life. That's how I help people get in touch with their vulnerability and authenticity.

"I've learned that the things in my past that hurt are what led me to be who I am now and to enjoy being who I am now. I am almost as grateful for the hurts in my past as for the wonderful and nice things that have happened. I wouldn't enjoy my life so much if it wasn't for all that I've gone through. The gratitude has pushed my resentment out."

Blanchard says it is a joy to work with art students because they "really get it. I don't have to teach them that creativity is important. They already know that. And I don't have to teach them that human beings can create something new. They've already got that. The thing about the College of Art is that the students come, and we all appreciate that we're creating something new. It's for the sake of creating, not that we think we're going to get rich or famous. It's just that we're creating."

The projects were set to be unveiled Saturday at TheatreSouth, beneath the sanctuary at First Congregational Church at 1000 S. Cooper, with students presenting their art and telling about it.

Blanchard is exploring whether the artwork can be publicly displayed later, either at the college or in a nearby gallery.

"It's so different than any other academic class we've taken," says Foss. "I don't know whether to be nervous or excited."

That angst is part of the course, says Blanchard. “We become artists shaped by the pain of our lives.”

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