

## The Arts and Our Surroundings

*Jill P. May*

In April I attended the 2010 Jack Stone Award for New Music concert at Northwest Vista College, a two-year state institution with a strong music program. My daughter Beth is an assistant professor there, and she initiated the competition through a grant from Yale University. This year's winning composer was Mihye Kim of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, for her piece entitled "Chamber Music for Flute, Clarinet and B-flat, Bassoon and Piano." She and the two runners-up were flown in by Northwest Vista and Yale and hosted for the premiere performance of their compositions by the Olmos Ensemble. Beth's proposal received strong support and funding from both Yale and Northwest Vista, and consequently, this annual competition will continue to be open to all music students in community colleges within the U.S.

For the past three years, I have attended my other daughter Heather's play productions at Auburn University where she is an assistant professor in the Theatre Department. Heather has devoted her directing career to plays that represent diverse populations within mainstream society. Her goal has always been to extend our understanding of the arts beyond our own community experiences.

Neither of my daughters would have become professionals in the arts if the school system in West Lafayette, Indiana, had not provided a strong program in the arts. Music and literature were ingrained in the curriculum. Art was entrenched in the schools. Often, these programs gave a sense of self to a child who otherwise struggled in the highly academic climate of the school system. At one point during high school, Beth told me that as much as she loved music she would probably study and teach art because children whose parents could not afford choir uniforms or instruments could take art. Art teachers, she observed, cared about their students' self-esteem. Though both daughters were taken to the theater and to musical presentations by their family, they also were actively engaged with their peers in concerts and plays sponsored by their schools. This allowed them to see the arts as a home for a viable career.

Looking back at my childhood, I realize that school programs in the arts helped me understand how music and the visual arts enriched our daily lives. I attended a four-room K-8 school in Wisconsin during grades 4-8, and I have strong memories of monthly visits with my teachers to the courthouse where we selected books for our classroom. I can visualize participating in the annual music pageant and remember listening to different genres of music in my classroom each week. Isolated in a country school, I might have missed the cultural and social imperative of the arts had the school district not sponsored these events.

As we selected books for this special issue, Janet and I never anticipated the change in school funding that has happened across the country. We have both worked closely with teachers in Indiana, and we felt sure that though national and state standards sometimes seem to drive corporations more than they did prior to President George W. Bush's administration, the arts were safe. Good publishers of books for children and young adults were still releasing exceptional literature about artists and the arts. We had a great variety of material to select from as we looked through these publications. Yet this spring we watched school districts in our area cut librarians and arts teachers, and we worried about the state's commitment to the arts. Youngsters who earlier turned to visual art and music because they excelled in these classes while struggling in math and science seemed voiceless in the budgetary decision-making process. We hoped that the schools and publishing houses would not change their standards.

Once we began reading about arts education, we realized that citizens in many states were calling for support of arts education. In Texas, school districts, students, and teachers believe the arts are an essential ingredient in student success. On March 11, the *San Antonio Express-News* reported that hundreds of students traveled to the state capitol and performed in the rotunda to draw attention to the role of art in contemporary education. Robert Floyd, Executive Director of the Texas Music Educators Association, told the newspaper that exemplary schools had 61% of the students enrolled in arts programs while low performing schools enrolled only 44 % of their students in the arts.

Not all corporations in our area are changing their paradigm on arts education. The Lafayette School Corporation's *Homepage* touted its consistently high honors in state and national art competitions as well as in state music competitions, and it paid homage to uniquely strong programs in art, radio/television, and music theory. This summer, the Corporation announced that it had entered into a partnership with the Tippecanoe Arts Federation and North Central Health Services in *ARTeach*, a program to help area youth who could not otherwise afford to participate in the music program by providing a musical lending library holding instruments for students in grades 5-12.

When you look at the books selected for this issue, you will notice that several tell the stories of American artists who made the arts their home and whose work should inspire the students Beth observed in her art classes. You will see that we have included books that encourage youngsters to look at their environment with more discerning eyes. And you will find thoughtful pieces by two professionals in the field of children's literature. Furthermore, our teachers and our critics did not let us down when we asked them to share this literature with young people and write reviews. We hope that their insightful commentaries will guide you to these—and other—books found in your local and public school libraries.

### Works Cited

"Students rally to keep fine arts in schools." *San Antonio Express-News*. [http://www.mysan-antonio.com/news/MYSA031107\\_07B\\_Fine\\_Arts\\_31376be\\_html22540.html](http://www.mysan-antonio.com/news/MYSA031107_07B_Fine_Arts_31376be_html22540.html). July 8, 2010.

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