

Artists Among Us — Art Therapist Nina Denninger Discovers New Artistic Medium in Education

by Christopher Cussat

Nina Denninger is an incredibly grateful individual. This is because over 30 years ago, she found her life's passion (art therapy) and she has been gainfully employed in her profession ever since. Today, Denninger is an Associate Professor and Program Director of the Graduate Art Therapy Program at Seton Hill University.

"There is never a day when I wake in the morning and don't want to go to work," says Denninger, "Sometimes, when I am teaching or supervising students, I am amazed that I am getting paid to spend my time as I do."

Denninger is also a registered and board certified art therapist (ATR-BC) and a licensed professional counselor (LPC). "My specialization, I suppose, is art therapy education. I have directed undergraduate and graduate art therapy programs around the country (including Bowling Green State University, OH; California State University, Sacramento, CA; and Seton Hill University, PA)—and I have had the privilege and pleasure of training others to work with clients in diverse settings," she adds.



Years ago, her favorite artistic media were ink and stone. "I loved doing intricate pen and ink drawings and loved carving relatively soft stone." But over the years, Denninger has discovered that artistic expression can transcend paper, canvas, and

sculpture. "I like to think, however, that my most creative endeavor has been eliciting the hidden treasures that exist in the students I have taught!"

Denninger believes that she was drawn to stone work, art therapy, and education at a very young age—and she has even discovered an interconnection among them. She explains, "As a child I was deeply, deeply moved by the film, 'The Miracle Worker.' I was fascinated by Anne Sullivan's capacity to see all the potential that existed in Helen Keller, and her desire and ability to bring Helen out of her isolation and into her selfhood." Denninger feels that this process was similar to the work she did with stone—eliciting the form that was hidden within. "In retrospect, I can appreciate how that has been the motivating 'gestalt' of most of my life's activity. For years, I have been 'educing' and honing the hidden talents and compassion in my students."

Like many of those whom we profile in this series, Denninger also has found it difficult to find time to create her own artistry while balancing the demands of her professional obligations. "I don't [find that balance], unfortunately—at least not in terms of working with traditional art materials. As the director of a graduate art therapy program, I have a broad range of administrative responsibilities. In addition

to teaching and supervising interns, that prevents me from having long periods of time in which to pursue concepts in artistic media."

But Denninger has realized the intrinsic artistic value that lies in molding new artistic students. "As I mentioned earlier, much of my artistic and creative endeavor takes the form of honing the skills required to elicit the talents, skills, and empathy that reside in the students I train."

As far as she is concerned though, Denninger has found balance at least in her career, and she does not think that she is missing out on anything by not being a "full-time artist." She explains, "I feel my artistic interest is already manifested as a career in my current health-related profession. This is the wonderful marriage between art and psychology that makes art therapy so fascinating and aesthetically satisfying."

In fact, when asked if she would ever consider devoting herself to developing her art for the purpose of exhibition or sale, Denninger answers, "Probably not." She adds, "I was drawn to the field of art therapy because in art therapy, art products are not treated in the same way they are in most other art-related professions. Exhibition of artwork made in art therapy is possible, but making art for display or consumption by others is not the goal."

Denninger concludes that art therapy (and other expressive therapies) is vital to healthcare because they engage people in various forms of self-expression that can transcend the normal defenses we put up in the course of everyday life. "Expressive therapies tap into imaginal realms and enable people to experience deep personal transformation without necessarily having to verbalize their experiences. So although I rarely have time to personally pursue art making in any depth, my life has been devoted to getting others to spend time making, exploring, and enriching their own creative processes—and this has been immensely satisfying." †



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