

Raton art legacy celebrated as teacher Marv Newton retires

By TIM KELLER — For the Comet | Posted: Monday, June 1, 2015 2:00 am

RATON – When Marv Newton left his teaching job in Tulsa, OK, to start a school art program in Raton, the Sixties were still in full swing. The last thing he could have imagined would be standing in the Raton High School art classroom 46 years later to celebrate an exemplary program led by only two teachers through all of those years.

Last week, Newton visited his successor and former student, Kathy Vertovec, in the RHS art classroom that she has guided for the past 19 years. They reminisced as Vertovec packed up: She retires this week, passing the baton that's been carried for 46 years by only her and Newton. Between them, they built a program that led to this month's 45th annual Youth in Art show with more than 200 entries, plus a dynamic slate of classes that incorporate computers in art production and graphic design. The RHS Art Club has sponsored an exchange with students in Kenya and Honduras, and for decades it's celebrated the end of each school year with a field trip to art museums in Denver, Taos, or Santa Fe.

“Kathy was a good art student,” Newton says, and he wasn't surprised when she came on board the program that he'd founded in 1969. For two years, they overlapped, each teaching part-time. She'd taught art at Kearny Elementary since 1989. In 1996, she moved over to RHS.

“You were some big shoes to fill,” she tells Newton.

“You expanded our programs and made them better,” he replies, “bringing them into the 21st Century.”

It was Vertovec that sought grants to add computers. “It required lots of grants and a steep learning curve. I went to TSJC to learn how to use the computers and the software.” Now, every art student learns to work in Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, along with other programs.

Those programs have helped students design winning entries in this year's logo design contests for the Santa Fe Trail Balloon Rally and the school's Poetry Rocks! event. They were used for years to produce books illustrated by RHS students from stories written by Raton students of all ages, the winning entries in the annual Eye of the Tiger writing competition sponsored by the Art Club.



Art teachers Kathy Vertovec and Marv Newton

Vertovec has been an ardent advocate for mixing literature and the arts, founding Students for Student Publishing in which her students run their own small publishing press. Each of her advanced art students has illustrated an entire children's book from a story written by an elementary-school student that won an award in the previous year's writing competition. An annual hardbound anthology has collected winning writings from various categories, combining them with winning images from the big Youth in Art show.

"Commercial art is now done 95% in the computer," Newton says. He cites a long string of former RHS Art Club students that have become successful entrepreneurs, engineers, and innovators. Two, in Albuquerque and Colorado Springs, now own graphic design businesses that develop advertising for business clients.

In 2012, the Art Club received grants to send a computer to art students in Kenya and another to Honduras. Although the program fell short of its goal to collaborate in publishing work from students in those countries, the Raton students enjoyed conversations with their foreign counterparts.

They asked the Kenyans, "Do you see lions and giraffes where you live?" The Kenyan children erupted in laughter at the stereotype. No, they didn't see those animals. "Well," replied the Raton teens, "we see bears and deer outside our houses all the time." The Kenyan children gasped.

The emphasis in schools has changed since 2012. "Now all of our technology dollars are going to testing," Vertovec says. "We're going back to the basics—reading, writing and testing—but in the arts we innovate. We create, we problem solve, we make things."

Newton adds, "There's more to life than making a living. Art adds fullness to life. It helps us to see—to see more, better, and differently."

"When the textbooks and all educational materials are delivered via electronic tablets and computers," Vertovec says, "it will be artists that design and create all of the materials. It's going to be a big boon for the arts, and artists will be in demand."

She adds, "The best students in graphic design are usually the ones who learn to do it by hand first."

Looking at the displacement of programs by the new immersion in testing, she ponders, "Do we still want our kids to run? To sing? To draw? Kids feel good when they create something. We're the visionaries, the creators." What kind of a future would we have without that?

Newton says, "There's something innate in human beings that wants and needs to create things."

Raton Public Schools is currently advertising for only its third RHS art teacher since 1969. RHS principal Duncan Ware is committed. "Research after research tells us," he says, "that kids involved in art and music—anything that's hands-on—do better in math, critical thinking, and throughout the curriculum. It's a huge benefit."

With the shift of emphasis and budget to testing, what is the future for arts education in Raton?

Superintendent of Schools Neil Terhune says, “We’ll have three schools and as long as we can afford it we’ll have an art teacher at every school. The high school will be top priority, followed by the intermediate school. If we run out of money, the classroom teachers in grades K-2 will incorporate their own arts instruction.” For the moment, he’s optimistic that Raton will have three art teachers.

“At the high school,” he says, “we hope to find a great forward-thinking teacher like Kathy Vertovec to carry the program forward. And she’s agreed to participate on our selection committee.”

Meantime, Vertovec looks forward to following Newton’s path into an active retirement. Newton is a well-known watercolor painter whose serene landscapes and Native American scenes are shown in galleries and museums throughout the mountain west.

Vertovec paints in oils, portraits of her children and family members and landscapes of her beloved Johnson Mesa. She’s descended from six generations that have lived along the mesa.

“An artist,” she says, “can bless a place just by making a painting of it.”

As they move forward in their own creativity, both Vertovec and Newton leave behind an even greater blessing in their 46-year legacy of progressive arts education, their greatest gift to the people of Raton.