

Piecing together solutions to challenges at Challenger



Written by Dave Hill, Editor



Lisa Arnold, artist in residence at Challenger Elementary School in Thief River Falls, asks students to create a poem from the picture she holds. Eventually, students working with Arnold, will help create large mosaic murals for the school.



Students at Challenger Elementary School are excited about the prospect of working with Lisa Arnold (back row, center), artist in residence at the school, to create large mosaics for the school.

Often ascribed to Nelson Mandela, the following quote actually came from Marianne Williamson, an author: “Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.”

“Don't be small ... be big.”

Gradually, hands, small hands attached to small bodies - children who are eager to share their thoughts - begin to wave in the air.

Lisa Arnold still remembers the challenges she faced as a new student in Thief River Falls. Today, she helps students overcome obstacles in their lives by showing them how to express their feelings through art and poetry ... and by telling them: Don't be small ... be big.”

Dealing with challenges is the theme of a five-week artist-in-residency program at

Challenger Elementary School that is being led by the former Thief River Falls resident.

Ultimately, the project which explores challenges students face and overcome, will result in the construction of two to six three-foot wide by seven-foot high mosaic panels. Students will not only develop the theme for the panels by expressing their thoughts and experiences through poetry, performance and then visual art, they will also participate in the construction of the panels. A dedication ceremony is scheduled for sometime at the end of April.

“I think this project is important not only because it develops young people’s writing, verbal and visual skills, but it also helps children connect with themselves and their community,” said Arnold. “By working with a living artist, children also learn to see art as a vital and viable practice.”

This is a great opportunity for our students” said Principal Patrick Marolt. “Lisa has so much energy, passion, and knowledge which radiates to the children. Right now, the children are learning about poetry and they are having fun doing it.”

Arnold has always had an interest in art, but she admits the path to realization, meandered a bit. Arnold said her mother and grandmother were artists, but probably thought of themselves as crafters instead of artists. When Arnold graduated from Lincoln High School in 1985, she entered the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, N.D., and graduated with degrees in public speaking, interpersonal communication and romantic literature. She’s currently working on her doctorate.

In between her studies, she took what she described as a short break, during which she traveled in Europe, worked at a ski resort and a museum in Portland, Ore., and at several other places.

But Arnold explained that she has always been drawn to art, collage in particular, and then one day she received a letter from a friend, who also makes mosaics. Intrigued, Arnold said she went to the Internet, obtained information on how to make a mosaic and “got addicted.”

Arnold described it as feeling like she “just couldn’t stop.”

That was two and one-half years ago. As she reflects on the path that brought her to this day, Arnold said the whole path she had taken, pushed, even propelled her into it; and, not surprisingly, she has no regrets.

In the last year, everything has been falling into place. She’s had two major shows in Minneapolis, and she has had success in teaching, too - she teaches art at St. Thomas and St. Kate’s, and advises their “slam” poetry teams.

According to Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, “slam poetry is a postmodern performance poetry, a form of spoken word performed at a competitive poetry event, called a “slam,” at which poets perform their own poems (or, in rare cases, those of others) that are “judged” on a numeric scale by randomly picked members of the audience.” Arnold’s team has won at state competitions and performed in national competitions.

Arnold now lives in Minneapolis with her husband Hamlin Metzger, and their cat, Basil. Arnold says she’s never been happier, and says her future will consist of doing exactly what she’s doing now because, as she says, it sparkles, it’s pretty, and it makes her feel good.

Through experiences like the artist-in-residency program she’s involved in at

Challenger Elementary School, she said she hopes she can guide students to find something that makes them feel just as good about their future.

“If they imagine it, they can become it,” said Arnold.

Jill Johnson, a close friend and teacher at Challenger Elementary School, said that after observing several of Arnold’s classes, she was deeply moved. “I have witnessed children discover a deeper part of themselves they didn’t know existed. I have become a better teacher watching Lisa. I think I can safely say that other teachers feel the same way.”

Influential people

Arnold says she still feels a strong connection to Thief River Falls. The daughter of Judy Sorum and Arlen Sorum and of Ron Arnold, Arnold says when she is asked about her hometown, she describes it as a town, close to the Canadian border in northern Minnesota, that while cold in winter is populated with warm and welcoming people.

As a child growing up in Thief River Falls, some of the influential personalities in her life included Ms. Moe, her kindergarten teacher, Mr. Isaacson, and Mr. Dyrud - teachers, she said, who challenged her.

Arnold said rather than rebelling, she accepted the challenges and it helped her explore the world around her. She became involved in experiences that helped develop her leadership skills; and, when she went on to UND, she explored leadership opportunities there, too.

These experiences, combined with what she described as a sensitivity to violence, and a need to stick up for the little guy, helped her find her voice - and that voice is helping others find their voice through art.

Arnold is enthusiastic about her opportunity to help children in Thief River Falls find their voice.

When she asked children what important lessons they learned in poetry class, their comments included: “Wow, I love poetry, I learned how to use my five senses. I Learned that poetry is important. I learned not to let other people control my life. Lisa, I didn’t know that my light could shine that big.”

“What could make the experience any better,” said Arnold. “Thanks for letting me share; I’m jazzed. These little humans are so talented, amazing and pretty dang funny.”

She thanked Jill Johnson, a childhood friend who is a title instructor and teacher at Challenger Elementary School, for helping her secure this residency. She also thanked Thief River Glass, Thief River Interiors, the Zehlians, the Thief River Falls Education Foundation, Judy and Arlen Sorum, Gretchen Beito, Ruth and Ole Tweet, and the parents of Challenger Elementary School for their contributions to this project. She also asks for continued community support for this project and other artistic endeavors in the community. Contributions, she said, are welcome.

“The memories that are being created at Challenger will be treasured for years to come. The legacy the children will create in April by making the mosaic pieces will be one that our whole community will be proud of,” said Johnson.