

# NEIGHBORHOODS

## Painting a new canvas every day

Art teacher uses high-tech equipment to inspire students

DERRY AREA HIGH SCHOOL

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From the first squiggles a child draws on paper, the tentative hand that forms letters for the first time and the completion of a simple math problem, art is formed.

"The first squiggles are ideas," said Richard McWherter, visual arts instructor at Derry Area High School. "When you learned to make letters, that is art. That is an idea. Before you can read or do math, you have to know the squiggles on paper are ideas. Art makes learning possible."

McWherter has been expanding the boundaries of the Derry Area art classroom since 1996. A native of Derry and graduate of the school, McWherter's innovative thinking has brought advanced technology into the art program, which serves about 250 ninth- to 12th-grade students a year.

Facing a limited school budget, McWherter, who received the Excellence in Education Award from LaTrobe Area Chamber of Commerce Education Foundation in 1999 and 2003, found other avenues to upgrade the classroom.

He has helped secure more than \$50,000 in grants and awards for technology and educational programs during his years at Derry Area.

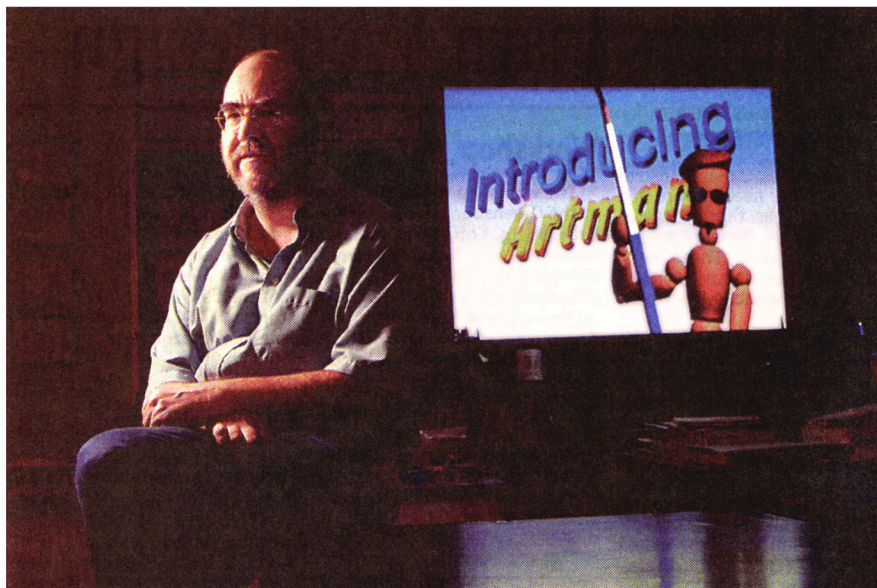
"He's taken our district to a whole new level," said Kathy Perry, high school principal. "The numbers are high for his class enrollment. He's not fearful of technology. He's driven and motivated to inspire kids more than you could dream."

"He's very resourceful. Getting the grants is a team effort, as he tells me what he'd like to go after and it sometimes involves our technology coordinator. He goes out and finds these grants. He doesn't ask for matches."

The most recent grant, a \$2,500 award from Best Buy, was used to purchase a high-definition video projector. McWherter, named a Keystone Technology Integrator by the Pennsylvania Department of Education in 2005, created a digital presentation on how Derry Area has used technology in the art department.

The school received the grant based on samples of how technology already has been integrated into McWherter's classroom and a proposal for how the \$2,500 award would be spent.

SEE ART • 3



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Derry Area High School art instructor Richard McWherter sits in front of the high-definition screen that he uses as a visual aid in teaching.

## Art teacher uses technology to inspire

ART • FROM 1

"The reason I asked for this grant is if I can show the students photos of art, of what other students did, it raises the bar on expectation. They can't copy another student's design. They can use it as an idea and change it to make it bigger, taller, different. They can see how creative they can get by seeing other examples. It has raised the standard and shows the students what I am looking for. I'm looking for creativity. It inspires students for what can be done."

The projector is used by students to show their artwork in a digital format and for McWherter to present historical and contemporary art when teaching the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for the Arts. The projector helps students visualize possibilities.

As an introduction, McWherter uses the projector for an eight-minute art promotion he designed with examples of what he expects from the students. In that presentation, students are exposed to various artworks and to philosophies that can help motivate and inspire. One such motivator is "ideas are precious and imagination never rests."

"I can show them other students' work, movies of famous artists and inspirational films," he said. "It's to generate interest. I want to motivate, inspire. Life is a canvas. ... What will you paint today?"

### A new dimension

McWherter teaches basic design, ceramics, crafts, jewelry, commercial art, drawing, sculpture and a groundbreaking 3-D animation course. McWherter said high-tech equipment is a way to

spark interest in today's students, who use technology in their everyday lives with TVs, CDs, DVDs, computers, hand-held electronics and cell phones. The 3-D course gives students a high-tech creative outlet.

"This is student-driven," McWherter said. "The kids are interested in these things. What should we do to reach these kids? We can reach them through high-tech equipment. I was able to introduce writing into art class. They design characters and create stories. It's thinking in 3-D."

Students design a fantasy character, create a drawing, sculpt molds and scan photographs into a computer or build the 3-D image in the computer using advanced math, such as geometry.

The course is popular, and some students take it a second time as an independent study that doesn't conflict with the current class. Only 20 seats a year, 10 each semester, are available in the 3-D course. McWherter must turn away interested students because of limited equipment.

Each of the 3-D animation machines and its software costs about \$3,000. The district upgraded the software in 2005 at a cost of \$3,000.

McWherter is hoping to add another course in digital painting and is now seeking grant funding for it.

"I have the best job in the world," McWherter said. "I get to teach a job I love. For students, I want creative thinking and problem solving, which you need in any career."

### Learning to think

Creative thinking and problem solving are vital, Perry said, adding students are encouraged to take the required arts and human-

ities half-credit in an art course.

"We need creative thinking and problem solving in art and in math," Perry said. "You use it in everything. We encourage students to enroll in an art course for that requirement because of the creativity and problem solving."

Grading artwork is another creative process. McWherter relies on students to grade themselves. He then compares his mark to the students'. If the grades don't agree, they discuss it and decide what the grade should be.

The grading scheme is based on creativity, effort, participation, requirement fulfillment, craftsmanship and timely completion.

"If they want to redo a project, they can," McWherter said. "If they get a better grade on it, I will take the better grade."

Passing on his knowledge is only one part of teaching for McWherter, a fine arts photographer since 1973. His work has been exhibited in regional shows, and he has received local and national awards and recognition. He also has taught as an adjunct instructor at Westmoreland and County Community College, Seton Hill University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. This semester, McWherter is teaching a digital imaging course at Seton Hill.

McWherter's ambition is to inspire students and reach those who have unknown talents.

"I want to get kids in art who don't think they can do art," he said. "I get kids in here who didn't think they could do art until they did a hands-on project."

"Students don't want to take drawing because they say they can't draw. We try to get past that. You sign up for drawing so you can learn to draw. You learned to make letters. You can learn to draw art."