

MERIT of the ARTS

An Adrian perspective

by jeff ball



Submitted Photo



Jack Sprauer '04



One of the great joys of working at a small school such as Adrian College is the sense of community that permeates nearly every interaction among faculty, students, and staff. Gathering with students and colleagues at sporting events or chapel are the obvious manifestations of this spirit. The more subtle connections are even more powerful. The student population at Adrian is small enough that faculty members can't help but know their students outside

of class. This daily connection with students is a strong, binding force, one that creates the village-like atmosphere of the College. Feeling connected makes us all better people, and for many of us who are professors, the college remains the single most important source for our connectivity beyond ourselves.

The arts serve a vital function in creating that community spirit. Last term, I was fortunate enough to see four plays, four concerts, two vocal performances, and five art exhibi-

tions on the Adrian College campus. In each case, the work or performance I saw was the product of the Adrian College community; they all had a pleasing sense of familiarity about them, because they all featured friends and "neighbors". Typically, in the days after these events, I had conversations about the performance or the work of art with a student that had participated in the concert or made the piece on display. In discussing the choices an actor made about a role or the nuances of why the



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painter chose chairs as a subject becomes part of the on-going artistic act, connecting artist and viewer together. Some of my most pleasant moments have been talks with students about their artistic lives. What I sense in many of these conversations is the true spark that motivates that person, the feeling of joy, excitement, and, at times, even transcendence.

That is what the arts do for us, creators and watchers alike. In the moments when the symphony works together to bring forth a beautiful passage from Bach; when the soprano steps forward and takes the listener to the very heights of the chapel; when the ceramicist manipulates clay to reveal a new way of looking at the world around us; when the group of actors, directors, technicians, and stage designers combine their skills to further our understanding of the human condition: in such moments of joining, we become something greater than ourselves. We take pride in belonging.

This community of belonging is not just campus-specific. The arts have always been an important way for colleges and local communities

to connect. At Adrian College, interesting exhibitions, plays, and music performances pull audiences from the entire region, not just students and employees of the school. The most obvious manifestation of this is the Adrian Symphony, an example of a direct cooperative agreement between the college and the community. Only with such cooperation are we able to have a professional conductor and orchestra to add to the cultural life of the region. In turn, outreach and educational programs from such bodies reinforce the cyclical nature of the arts by giving back to the communities that support them.

Yeah, yeah, you say. That's all nice and idealistic, but what about practical issues of careers and earning a living? How can we afford the luxury of the arts in times of financial tightening, when health care, for instance, is needed more urgently. One can answer this in many ways.

First, from a practical perspective.

Studies have consistently shown that a vibrant arts scene is important for the economic success and livability standards of communities. In city redevelopment, consideration is almost always given to areas for cultural sites such as galleries, performance spaces, and art and craft businesses. Art fairs have become a staple of many communities' yearly calendar. To get a strong sense of the importance of the arts to modern American life, look at the various surveys of desirable places to live, and notice how much attention is paid to the arts scene of the community. Thus, the arts as a measure of the vibrancy of a community is a pretty good yardstick.

You can also answer the question about the usefulness of the arts from an educational perspective. Studies also have shown a close relationship between academic success and the well-roundedness of students. Math scores tend to rise among students that also study music. Visual learning in studio courses also aid in how you learn conceptual ideas and abstract thinking. Medical, law, and other professional schools will usually choose a student that shows a wide-range of abilities, all other things being equal among candidates.

Because of the way the arts allows us to approach our lives in different ways, giving us a breadth of ideas

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about the world around us, I would contend that they are as essential to our well-being as healthy, engaged participants in life as any other aspect of existence. The arts are not luxuries, but basic parts of what makes us human.