

Fine Arts Assistant Principal Heather O' Connell Polacik on Creating A Safe Place To Nurture Your Art

As told to Ron Sklar

The most common challenge seen by Fine Art assistant principal Heather O' Connell Polacik: lack of confidence among student artists. She has solutions, though.

"Students often need support in knowing that either the art they are creating needs work or that there are places they can go with it," she says.

"There is always room for growth without allowing their insecurities to hold them back -- that's where a lot of the work takes place."

Some of the challenges Heather comes across requires an "okay:"

it's okay to struggle in this moment

it's okay that you are having a hard time getting through this work

it's okay that you're drawing a blank right now.

It's okay that you're not drawing this 100 percent correctly.

Heather's answer: just keep working on it -- and you're going to get there. The goal is to make students understand that it's okay to make mistakes and that they can create something that they don't love -- and that's okay.

"As long as they keep going, it's going to get better," she says.

She speaks from genuine experience. Her love of art began in the public schools she attended on Long Island. Her mom was widowed young, and despite the challenges of raising two children on her own, she also nurtured a passion for photography. She passed that artistic passion on to her kids.

"I was always painting and drawing and taking pictures," Heather says.

In high school she took the fine-arts route. She considered her art classrooms her “safe place,” with teachers she loved.

Her mom emphasized the importance of a stable job, so she decided to combine her love of art with teaching. She attended St. Joseph’s college as an undergrad and then Hofstra for graduate school, majoring in education and minoring in fine arts.

“I knew I didn’t want to leave art,” she says. “I knew I wanted it to be part of my everyday life. The road of an artist didn’t seem practical from what I saw growing up. I saw my mom have to do a very practical thing and take care of two little kids. And so I always had that in mind. I wanted to make sure that I never had an issue taking care of myself or my family if need be. And so I went that way. And it shaped my entire life and I’m very thankful because I ended up at a place that was most perfect for me.”

Not just a perfect place, but a *safe* place, as it is for most of her students as well.

“This has become their safe place -- their favorite place -- a place where they love to go,” Heather says of LaGuardia’s fine art classes. “I love kids and I love being able to provide classes for them. I make sure that a place like this is the best possible place.”

Of course, LaGuardia students already have a head start when it comes to nurturing a passion for the arts.

“The kids who come into our classes are just so thrilled to be here and be immersed in art,” Heather says. “They are excited to learn about it all. That’s not necessarily true for all city schools. Here, they ‘get’ all of it and they love it. Anything that comes their way, they love it.”

The department’s great success is also fueled by its teachers and support staff.

"I feel very fortunate in the fine arts department to have an amazing staff," she says. "The teachers are executing a lot of that on-the-ground work that takes place. I love working with the teachers and talking to them about what's happening in their classes. And making sure that they have everything that they need in order to provide learning to the kids, and to keep them excited."

That goal extends to each individual student; Heather has a philosophy for that:

"Try your best, every single day," she advises. "Come into class every day with the mindset that you are there to work at whatever art that you are creating, and to do your best with that art. Don't feel pressured that your art is not looking a certain way or looking like the art of the person next to you. Know that you are on a very personal journey to develop as an artist."

LaGuardia is here to nurture and grow its students, and a major road to personal fulfillment is having the right attitude.

"When you're here, use your time wisely," she says. "Students I see struggling are often self-conscious, or they think they don't have the talent. They may think *that's it, I'm going to stop. I'm going to stop trying*. But the ones who continue to try and push through any struggles that they have, they succeed in the end, because they're all here for a reason."

One thing that's important for every student to remember: it's not a race or a competition; it's a personal journey.

"Everyone here is talented," Heather says, "so it's just a matter of finding that talent from within, believing in your own talent and continuing to work that talent. It's easy for a freshman or sophomore to think, *I'm not there and I'm never going to be there*. That's not true. You can get there with really hard work and dedication. The idea of the natural artist -- if you have it, you have it; if you don't, you don't -- is not necessarily true. You can work it out."

