

2020 Awards Night Speech

One Sunday afternoon, rain hammered on the skylight above the ceramics studio, adding to the background noise of the constant drone of the kiln fan and narration of the Harry Potter audiobooks. The studio, thanks to Mrs. McGiff, was immaculate: tools organized, work tables free of clutter, and the floor spotless, except for a two-foot radius of clay splatter surrounding one of the six wheels which sat in a line against the left wall of the studio. And on that wheel sat me, a sixteen-year-old boy, tirelessly, almost obsessively, throwing vessel after vessel of a variety of different shapes and sizes: tall and short, wide and thin, filling the wooden shelves with my creations. I worked with an intense focus, attempting to master the fast-moving slippery clay between my palms. The movements felt so natural; the centering, pulling up, and bellying out of the clay all felt like actions that my hands have always known how to execute.

If you had asked me why I toiled away for hours in the ceramics studio on that Sunday afternoon as well as many others, I would have told you that three months ago, I considered myself to be the least artistic person that I knew. Growing up, my twin sister Grayson was always better at drawing and painting than me; I was absolutely abysmal. Because I lacked the skill to use those two mediums with the same beauty and grace that she did, I labeled myself the intellectual who loved science and reading, the left brained counterpart to my sister's artistic abilities. By the time I came to St. Andrew's, I had cut myself off from the arts in their entirety. My lack of agility in dance, pitchy voice, and sub-par pinch pots, made me dread attending my Intro to the Arts classes during my Freshman year. And when the time came for me to decide which art I would take in order to fulfill my art credit during my sophomore year, I chose ceramics with Mrs. McGiff because, A) it seemed like the least terrible option and B) Mrs.

McGiff seemed like one of the coolest people I had ever met. It wasn't just her dreads and her loving relationship with her dog Max that made such an impression on me. I was amazed by her skills as a potter, as well as how her creativity seemed to radiate from her and served as such an essential aspect of her personality. It became clear to me that this woman was a true artist: not just someone who was a proficient potter, but someone who possessed an innovative and experimental perspective on her work, and the world, that she had developed through her many years of triumph and failure regarding ceramics and the arts in general. This was a distinction that Mrs. McGiff would attempt to instill in me for the entirety of my sophomore year, and I am sad to say, with little success.

Looking back to that boy obsessively throwing piece after piece on that Sunday afternoon two and half years ago, I would not consider him an artist, because my motivation to work with clay was not derived from a need for artistic expression, rather my need to prove to my friends and family that I too could be proficient in an art form. This sentiment held me back from fully appreciating ceramics as the fine art that it truly is. I was obsessed with the physicality of my pieces, how impressive the shapes and sizes were, and the vast quantity of them that I had produced. For a long time, I gave little to no thought as to how I glazed my pieces; I often used whichever glazes were already pulled out, mixed, sieved, and ready to go because I was so desperate to get back to the wheel and continue to throw and produce more pieces. So at the end of my sophomore year, as I stood in the Warner Gallery looking at my collection of dinner plates that I had erratically splatter painted, which is the embodiment of artistic laziness, I was left dissatisfied with my work. I had let myself down, ruining this opportunity to share this new and

exciting aspect of my life with my friends and family. This was the first of many critical moments of my Saint Andrew's career that would take place in the Warner Gallery.

So after taking a break from ceramics for a few months, I returned to school for my junior year ready to redeem myself. I spent countless hours in and out of class attempting to use new throwing techniques, clays, and glazing patterns. During that year, I took risks with new shapes and colors, I challenged myself, I faced difficulties with the ceramic process, I fell out of love with ceramics, I went back to the basics, I asked for critical advice, I failed, succeeded, and failed again. And slowly, but surely, an artist began to emerge from within me. My hard work and devotion over the course of that year culminated in one night: the 2019 Arts Weekend Student Gallery Opening. I often describe it as one of the best nights of my entire life. Even now, I can recall every minute of it. This night is so special to me not only because of the complements and praise that I received from members of the St. Andrew's community or when Mr. Foehl, Mr. Kunen, and Mr. Sanchez all shook my hand and said how proud they were of me. No, this night was made unforgettable because of the countless expressions of joy, curiosity, and pride that I saw on people's faces as they viewed my somewhat overwhelming ceramics display. And it was then when I saw these reactions from my friends, mentors, and strangers that I finally understood and appreciated the role that the artist plays in our society. They provide an essential sense of aliveness through the way that they express their own identities with the use of shape and color. The energy that I experience as I walk through a gallery teeming with the excitement of my fellow artists, lighting the world with their artwork that encapsulates their emotions, hard work, and dedication, is unique and something that I have only ever found in the Warner Gallery. This is the ultimate lesson that the art programs at St. Andrew's strive to teach us; that our art is a

means of expression through which we can perceive reality through a different lens, allowing us human beings to escape the monotony of our own lives. The world relies on artists to challenge the order of things, to pay tribute to the past, and dream of a better future. The world needs artists, in all forms, whether you paint, draw, sing, sculpt, dance, throw, act, or write. Try to imagine our world without the vibrant life that artists supply to our society: without Abby Sahs' beautiful water-color paintings, Georgina Ohrstrom's whimsical dragons, Beck Sturmfell's three dimensional buildings, Ingrid Hoopes' nostalgic houses, Alyse Ray's brilliant lamp, Lilly Howard's celestial interpretations and all of the other magnificent artwork that I had the honor of witnessing my fellow art majors create this past year. I can't. But thanks to Saint Andrew's, I will never have to imagine that world because they have provided me with a truly life-changing experience for which I will forever be grateful.