

## Artist's Work Links Community and Campus

### Michael Robin



*Photo credit: Cory Schewaga*

Jane McWhirter has discovered art has great power to change, to heal, to grow—and she is working to share that power.

“I was lost for so long,” McWhirter said. “To see where I was five years ago versus now, it’s completely different. I’ve grown so much. I’ve learned to believe in myself; I’ve learned to love myself.”

McWhirter works with the University of Saskatchewan community engagement team at Station 20 West.

It is just another way that arts fills a busy schedule that includes teaching art with various community organizations, creating her own paintings and associated work, and pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the university.

“The position was community arts engagement,” she explained. “There wasn’t too much of a description because it didn’t really exist before.”

Drawing on her broad experience with other organizations—like Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Programming (SCYAP) and Eagle’s Nest Youth Ranch—she reached out to community organizations looking for ways to share the power of art. For example, at the White Buffalo Youth Lodge she helped lead a “photo voice” project where participants told their stories through photographs.

Engaging with youth is something McWhirter knows well. She has been involved with SCYAP both as a participant and an arts leader for the past several years. The organization offers art outreach and even employment to youth, particularly those from underprivileged and troubled backgrounds.

McWhirter was one of those troubled youth, plagued by low self-esteem and prone to partying and skipping class in the three Saskatoon high schools she attended. She managed to graduate, albeit a year late and with bare-minimum marks.

“I just didn’t care about school,” she said, explaining that coming from a single-parent home of modest means made her a target for derision by more well-heeled kids. “The crowd that I did fit in with was kind of the rebels, and it was better to skip class, to just go outside and smoke, that kind of stuff.”

That changed when she discovered the SCYAP Urban Canvas Project shortly after

dealing with drinking and substance abuse.

“Basically the premise of the Urban Canvas Project is they take 12 people between the ages of 16 and 30 who’ve faced adversity in the past,” she said.

“It could be adversity from drug abuse, it could be gang-related, it could be crime, anything like that. Low self-esteem, different types of abuse, sexual abuse, bad relationships, as long as they were ready to take their lives and turn them in a new direction.”

The program gave her the equivalent of a job. It was 40 paid hours per week for eight months, and taught her drawing, painting, colour theory, recreation and creating original works including full murals, with the capstone being an exhibition at the Mendel Art Gallery. At the same time, they worked on life skills such as setting healthy boundaries, dealing with addictions and overcoming abuse. Finally, participants would work towards further education or employment.

“We had really great mentors,” McWhirter said, adding that Jordan Schwab, a graduate of the U of S master’s of fine arts program, was one of her mentors. “He really pushed me, in a way. If I asked him for help and advice he’d always be straightforward and tell me what was flawed. It was kind of harsh sometimes, but I think it’s what helped me.”

The program gave her “just the tiniest spark of self-confidence,” a spark that was nurtured by her mentors, who encouraged her to apply for university. With her age and poor high school marks, she was uncertain and almost gave up in the process of applying as a mature student.

“I was like, ‘oh I don’t have a credit card, so I can’t apply,’” she said. “He (Schwab) pulled out his credit card and said, ‘I’m putting this on here. Now go to the bank, take out money, pay me back. But we’re doing this.’”

Four years into her degree, McWhirter is “50 per cent done”—a bit slower than usual, she acknowledges, but understandable in light of her numerous commitments.

In addition to her work at Station 20 West, she remains very active with SCYAP, including managing the gallery, organizing exhibits, public speaking, mural painting, and working with at-risk youth such as those at Eagle’s Nest and Dream Brokers, among other programs that cater to disadvantaged youth. On top of this are her personal works, occasional commissions for murals, logos and other commercial art. She is an author-illustrator of a children’s book, an opportunity that grew out of interviews she did with recent immigrants and refugees to Saskatoon as part of a university project.

By sharing her own experiences, teaching and mentoring, McWhirter retains her passion to show others the power of art.

“If I can be a little tiny spark in someone else’s life, that’s all I want to be,” she said. “Just something to help them grow, to show them things. To let them know and realize that if they believe in themselves, a lot of things are possible.”

### **About the Author**

**Michael Robin** is a research communications specialist within the Marketing and Communications group at the University of Saskatchewan. He has been a writer, editor, photographer, and communications strategist for newspapers, public relations and advertising firms, educational institutions, and research funding agencies. As a science writer, he works to uncover compelling examples of discovery and creation among researchers, scholars, and artists, tells their stories and shares them with the world. Email: [michael.robin@usask.ca](mailto:michael.robin@usask.ca)