



LIZ MEACHAM/DN

DANNY CURTIS SITS at the Indian Center in front of artwork, including his own and that of teen-agers who he works with at the center. He plans to display their work in the spring of 2000 or when all of the artwork is finished.

CREATING A VISION

STORY BY BY ERIC RINEER

Freelance artist, Lincoln native finds niche teaching youths

Since returning to Lincoln in 1991, freelance artist Danny Curtis has made his mark on the community by serving as an inspiration for area youths.

Curtis, a Lincoln native who graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1991, has spent the majority of his career working with students.

Curtis' peers say he does an exceptional job of getting his students to discover themselves artistically.

Mary Lee Johns, director of youth programs for the Lincoln Indian Center, 1100 Military Rd., said Curtis has a knack that enables him to relate well to students.

The Indian Center was recently given a \$5,000 grant by the Nebraska Arts Council for an art program it runs for American Indian youths. Part of the money goes to Curtis, who was selected by the center as the students' art teacher.

"He's not just standing in front of them trying to get respect," Johns said. "It's not that kind of relationship."

Curtis works particularly well with students by working differently with them according to their personality, Johns said.

"I've gained a lot of confidence myself from working with him," Johns said.

The two met at a conference in Milwaukee several years ago, before Curtis took the job at the Indian Center. Right away, Johns said, Curtis showed off his humor, which his students now enjoy.

Working with students is nothing new for Curtis. After returning from Kansas City, Mo., his first project was opening a mixed media cen-

ter in Lincoln's historic Haymarket District.

Curtis' center was for students of all ages to enhance their artistic skills.

"I really wanted to create a working artist studio," Curtis said.

The Fridge Door Arts Center is what Curtis called the studio where he would school his pupils on painting and cartooning. The center attracted university students as well as young children.

"A lot of university people started coming down and hanging out there," Curtis said. "It just became a different place."

The center lasted for three years, a span of time that absorbed a great deal of Curtis' energy.

"It was absolutely overwhelming," he said. "I don't know what was driving me, but the purpose was more important."

The purpose, he said, was to help children realize their full potential when interpreting art. Johns said Curtis did an exceptional job of helping American Indian youths interpret their heritage through their art.

All of the students at the Indian Center have learned how to interpret their American Indian heritage through his teaching, she said.

After his lease on the mixed media center ran out in 1994, Curtis again began aiming his work at child-oriented projects.

He designed T-shirts for the Folsom Children's Zoo and Botanical Gardens and worked on several projects for the Lincoln Children's Museum.

Curtis also designed a mural, which involved Americorps, and received attention from a national middle-school magazine.

Curtis couldn't put his finger on what it was about youths that drove him to teach. He pointed to some youths nearby who were playing with leaves, adding, "Just look at them. They're making stew out of leaves."

Johns elaborated on what she thought Curtis was implying. She said people tend to be more creative sometimes at an early age.

Curtis didn't look that deeply into his fascination with teaching children. He simply said: "Why not (like children)?"

Misty Thomas, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln junior family and consumer sciences major who works at the Indian Center, said Curtis' ability to work with students was something rare.

"He knows how to get their attention," Thomas said. "He knows how to have fun with them and knows how to entice them."

On one of his first days at the Indian Center, Curtis took the children to the Haymarket, and they viewed an art show, Thomas said.

Curtis also took them to the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden. At the museum, he divided the students into groups and gave them each a disposable camera to take pictures.

"What it did was break the ice," Johns said. "They got to see him as a really fun guy."

Photography is one of the main areas that Curtis has been working on with his students. A number of photos of his pupils are found in the

Indian Center.

Simple tools and supplies can be found there also, such as acrylic paint, ceramic stucco, modeling paste and canvases.

Most of the work by the students at the Indian Center is done on canvas. The majority of the canvases are decorated with American Indian symbols, including animals such as birds and horses. Shields and American Indian warriors also highlight the canvases. Other works include pillows with painted rabbit fur.

"I approach (art) differently with everybody," Curtis said. "The music, the magazines, the photography, the way you live."

"Some people qualify art as a museum or classical music," he said. "But it absolutely surrounds you wherever you go."

Wendy Weiss, UNL associate professor of textiles, clothing and design, said Curtis played an important role in helping her to complete a recent project.

The project, a collaboration between the Indian Center, UNL and Day Watch, 1911 R St., was a mural designed by Curtis and the students.

"It was really exciting when we had the reception, and the young people that made (the mural) were there," Weiss said. "They really began to see that they had been the artists for an artwork in a public space."

Weiss said it wasn't hard to notice Curtis' ability to interact with students during the project.

"He's really sensitive to the children," she said. "He likes to make things fun, and he's very respectful. He helps the kids see where their potential is."

Though most likely he'll stay working with youths, Curtis said, his plans are always subject to change. Working with youths is sometimes a lot of work, he said.

"You let things happen," Curtis said. "It's like controlled chaos, but you allow yourself room to move into another direction. Tomorrow I could change my mind and be a priest. Who knows?"

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MISTY THOMAS
UNL junior family and consumer sciences major