

No Cape Required

Rob Lynch, '98, '02, is a superhero. His alter ego? A celebrated artist, musician, and activist for urban regeneration. Yet by day, the calm, mild-mannered Lynch demonstrates his powers in a less public way—as a much-loved high school art teacher.

Over the course of his nearly 20-year teaching career at Niagara Falls High School, Lynch has widened the worldview of countless students through life-changing trips to cultural hubs like New York City, Pittsburgh, and Toronto. He has also created projects that ensure they learn the importance of giving back to their community.

"It's something I honestly feel is my calling," Lynch said of teaching. "Part of it might be that I never chose to have kids myself. In some sort of cosmic way, you feel like you give more of yourself to help nurture the youth somehow.... My students half-jokingly call me 'art dad.'"

The legendary artist and set designer Wayne White may have called Lynch "the best high school art teacher on Earth," but Lynch modestly credits his mentors in the Art Education Department for giving him the experience needed to begin teaching straight out of college.

After graduation, he returned to his native Niagara Falls to restore a neglected house and begin a full-time teaching position. In his little spare time, he started planting flowers and tending gardens in public spaces. "I thought it was an easy way to beautify the neighborhood. Through that I met some other city do-gooders," explained Lynch.

One of those was Seth Piccirillo, director of Niagara Falls Community Development. Piccirillo enlisted Lynch to curate a public art project to transform drab downtown building façades into an appealing outdoor gallery. Art Alley, as the pedestrian walkway located on the 400 block of Third Street in Niagara Falls is now called, features bright, cheerful large-scale murals from a score of regional artists.

"Only Rob could have brought together so many local artists and ideas for Art Alley," Piccirillo said. "He brought out the best in that space, as he does every day with his students."

For the past 16 years, Lynch has taught a weekly acrylic painting class for adults at the Buffalo Arts Studio, a cavernous space located in the Tri-Main Center on Main Street in Buffalo. Lynch always arrives early to make the studio more intimate and comfortable by lighting candles, playing music, and providing snacks. His students, many of them novices, are clearly inspired by the friendly setting, and they remark favorably on his approachable instruction style. "He teaches us a new skill at every class," said Denee Rich, '03. A nearby student, Julia Smith, agrees. "He teaches you to find your voice and do your own thing."

With all his art and teaching, it can be easy to forget that Lynch is also a versatile musician. A lifelong percussionist and drummer, he performed alongside famed pianist Al Tinney in Buffalo State's jazz band and recorded with the likes of Ani DiFranco and Peter Case, to name a few. He was inducted into the Buffalo Music Hall of Fame in 2011 and recently released *And Now We Have Bear Boxer*, his fifth recording of original music.

So between art, teaching, and music, which superhero hat fits him best? All of them, according to Lynch.

"I feel that it's all one creative act," he said. "You have a blank space that you're trying to make interesting. Whether it's my classroom or my house or the Art Alley project, I'm driven to make things. I feel that the creative life is a really good life."