

A Moment With My Very First Mentor

An interview with a high school art teacher

Marianne Murphy-Mead

AKA Mrs.Mead

By Emily Silver. November 11, 2024

Excuse my being cliché, but I have always known that I wanted to be an art teacher. Since I first realized I truly enjoyed helping others in their creative process, admittedly more than helping myself on my own at times, it has always been my end goal. An end goal that started to come into focus when I was in high school, taking classes with the now veteran teacher Mrs.Mead. Since I first met Mrs.Mead in 8th grade, and then started taking higher level classes with her in high school she has become one of two women that I think back to almost every day of my teaching.

I think back to the culture that she established in her classroom on day one, and further developed every day since. When I knew Mrs.Mead was within her first 5-6 years teaching and I am both lucky to have had her when I did, and envious of all the students that she has had since. Marianne Murphy-Mead is a talented artist with a passion for bringing that out in each of her students. Mrs. Mead has a gift for providing her students with encouragement and support to meet the high expectations that she sets with each project, while also pushing herself to continuously develop her programs to be the best they can be. She stresses the importance of a structured classroom where students are taught to be accountable for themselves while fully engaging them in every step of the creative process.

Art educators will rarely be given a specific curriculum that they are told to follow and are tasked with having to develop the lessons and projects that their students will do throughout the year. When given the opportunities like those available to the half hollow hills school district Mrs.Mead took full advantage. She was able to build up the Architecture and Drawing and Design for Production classes to give students a glimpse into some of the possibilities of working artists and what those careers might entail.

The art department at hills east is one that is hard to match, and it has become what it is thanks in a huge part to the impact of Mrs.Mead and the other art teachers. Mrs.Meads classroom and the Hills East art department is more than a series of art classes. This department is a community that began with Mrs.Mead and the 4-5 other art teachers that were working there in my first few years. My time at hills east fell coincidentally at the same time of the art department really getting its wings and I am honored to have been there at the beginning. Mrs.Mead is a one in a lifetime teacher who creates opportunities and experiences that live on as cherished memories for all of her students.

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Me: When did you decide that you wanted to be a teacher? Like what was that decision making process like?

Mrs.Mead: So I graduated from the school of visual arts, then I transferred to post and I graduated with my actual bachelor's in art history. So from there, I went into the advertising world and I was working for an advertising company, a pre-press company, so I was bouncing around in the art world for a little while and then I decided that it would be a really good idea if I became a teacher. So that was probably like two years after I graduated.

Me: So when you were becoming a teacher, like after you became a teacher, what were some of the biggest challenges? and I'm going to kind of connect this with the third question, is like as an art teacher, what are the challenges you've had in, I guess, Hills East? I don't know if you taught at other schools before that, actually, but or in well West Hallow,

Mrs.Mead: Yes, so I taught at Sewanika also.

Me: Oh, okay.

Mrs.Mead: For a year. It's in Floral Park. Okay. A year and then I came back in because, I was pregnant with Joseph, so I came back to be a teacher and I felt that I didn't have like as much of a presence as I have now as a veteran teacher, so I remember struggling with ways to, practice discipline, like disciplining the kids because of that. And then as I got a little bit more comfortable in my teaching skin, I then found ways to do that. So when you're younger, you don't tend to have all of those reasoning skills that you develop as you get older and also your views on the world change. So, you know, I remember as a younger teacher, I just, I was just struggling with all of those things and finding my place in, you know, how I was going to work with the kids and, you know, what I was going to be teaching. Like I bounced around a little bit once I went to Half Hollow Hills. And so then once I became the architecture teacher and design and drawing for production, which you know, I was really able to focus on developing a curriculum, becoming comfortable in that curriculum, because when you're not comfortable in your curriculum, then all the other things like discipline and just teaching off the cuff become a little bit, it's harder. And so once you do have that in place, you're able to be more natural and find just more creativity because of that.

Me: What does behavior management look like in your classroom as a high school class?

Mrs.Mead: Well, so, you know, discipline is a major factor in your classroom, right? Because it impacts how you're teaching, how the kids are experiencing your classroom. It's impacting how far you get in your lesson, how much time you're covering, how much, you know, how much, what am I saying, material you're covering. Yeah. And it impacts like your ability to get to, you know, goals and quarter goals, et cetera, at the high school. So it is, I've found that as an older teacher, I still have that caring nature and I'm very fair and they know I'm fair with grades.

And I've just found ways to let them know that, look, this is the deal. And you are here for a reason. This is like an elective course.

And yes, I am going to email your parent. It's not an angry thing. I'm not mad at you, but it helps, you know, it helps for them to just, instead of making a big deal out of it, they get an email home and then they come in the next day and maybe they feel a little better and they move on and they know, look, I really got to get my act in here because the longer you let it wait, that's when things escalate.

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And I do remember as a young teacher, that being more of a challenge.

Me: So why have you stayed at Hills East? Like as long as you have?

Mrs.Mead: So I'm at Hills because one, it's a phenomenal district. We have a very robust art program where other districts don't have that. I happen to be in the best position in terms of seniority. I got my position at Hills when a large majority of baby boomers were retiring, So I was able to get in at the right time. And, you know, once you get tenure and you move up the ranks in your pay scale, it's not easy to make changes because then when you go to the next district, they're not going to pay you what you've been paid, but that's not the reason. I mean, it is a great district and I happen to be lucky and that's why I'm still there.

Me: How do you design your lessons? And part two of that is, do you have any of those same projects from when I was your student, like the grammy award or tree house?

Mrs.Mead: So the Grammy has taken a shelf with the other Grammys, but the tree house project has been a favorite for 20 years now.

Me: Makes sense. It was awesome.

Mrs.Mead: And it's still a favorite and I think the kids look forward to it.

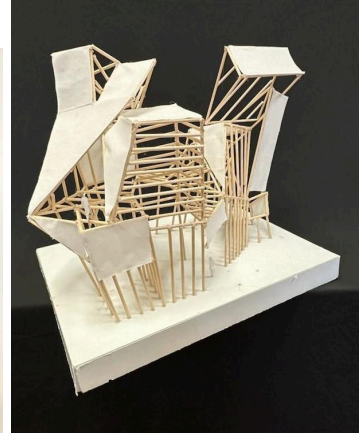
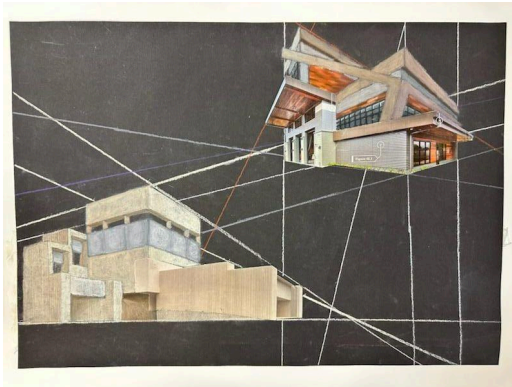
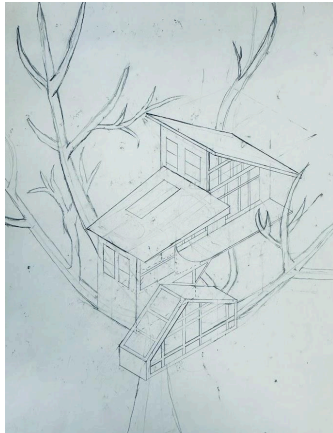
Me: Has it evolved?

Mrs.Mead: Yes, it has evolved because I only allow a certain amount of time for it now. So some elements I had to take away. Some I've improved like the process and how we're doing our preparation drawings for it. So like, for example, we do multiple, obviously you remember, we have multiple components. So we'll do like an isometric prep drawing on what it would actually look like in the tree. We draw the tree, we draw the isometric, we do the shape combination from the shape combinations. We then draw it in the tree. So they're like translating all of these different views, like 2D to 3D. And then from the 3D view, now they're going to the floor planning sector. And then from there, now they have to convert it to 3D modeling, which is the hardest thing. To get from a two-dimensional piece of paper into a three-dimensional model

of sculpture, especially something like architecture, architectural design, it definitely challenges them.

Yeah, it was one of my favorite projects.

Mrs.Mead: Yeah, everybody loves that one.



Me: Yeah, it was fun. Another project that I remember, and it was too big, I don't have it anymore. And I don't remember what like the goal of the activity was but...

Mrs.Mead: The door.

Me: Yes, the door! I think I remember you said you got it from your neighbor who was getting new doors or something.

Mrs.Mead: Yeah, so that project, that was, was that Trash to Treasure?

Me: Maybe.

Mrs.Mead: Might have been the Trash to Treasure project. So I took the mosaic component of that project, and it evolved into a table project. So now we use wood and they create tables and, and actually- that evolved even further, where not only are they just designing a table, but they're designing a table based on an architectural style. So it helps to narrow down, like if you notice the kids will be getting a little wild, I know you want to let everybody be super creative, right? We all do. But what happens is they just get, it's too much for them, and they need something to hold on to.

And so I found that when you give them something like that to work from, they're able to kind of hold on a little bit and not be so free because things can end up getting quickly out of hand, and you have to rein them back in. So that project became a table, and then the table separated from the mosaic, and now the tables are separate, and I do a stained project on the table. We do light stains, dark stains, and then the mosaic became a mandala, which in DDP (drawing and design for production) is a Lazy Susan.

So coupled with the makerspace, we, kind of, share that project, and we go there to cut the rounds, and then we put the Lazy Susan hardware on, and we draw the mandala, and then we mosaic it onto our Lazy Susan. Yeah, you know, everything I do takes forever, which you know,

but I find that at the high school level, *it's really good to push them into a place where they're owning their work, and they're vested in the work without overdoing it for too long. And so that's the greatest challenge that I've faced in my career*, is how to maybe not take so long, but get them to really understand all the nitty-gritties about the different components.

And so breaking it down into maybe different steps, like the treehouse, like I was explaining, the isometric drawing, the floor plan drawing, then the modeling, it's still the same unit, but it's separate components.

Me: What are some of the most effective ways that you have found to build relationships with your kids, and just like how you did with me, I felt like I could do anything in your class, and that you were supportive, and like you wouldn't do it for me, but you would help me get there every step of the way.
How do you do that?

Mrs. Mead: I guess I expect my kids to commit, right? And so they have to be part of the process, and I'll definitely guide and sometimes help with visuals and like imagining things, so giving them some helpful tips as to how to, you know, because sometimes they don't have it up there, so you have to lead them a little bit. And you know, you might see something that they don't see, and that's okay. Like some teachers or artists are very hesitant to lead in any way, but there's no way, right, to get somebody to jump to that next level without teaching them the basic vocabulary of how to get there. And so our job as art educators is to teach them those basics, like okay, here's the concept, how do I get to that next level of the concept? And then when they're older and they're in college or they're doing that, then they take it all and they are able to expand upon it. But you have to help them get there, and I guess that also ties into the question you asked me about developing a relationship, because through those conversations you, you know, you relate to them in some ways, you make funny jokes, you know, like I'm not afraid to say, like, what's going on here, you know, and they're not afraid to say, I don't know, or, you know, so it's, it's just the dynamic that you have when you can be more comfortable with them.

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*I painted the Chrysler Building when I was in high school and it is still there

Me: I know I spent most of my time in that hallway, so you knew a lot of what was going on with me, whether you wanted to do it or not haha

Mrs.Mead: And we love that, that's part of, you know, I love that as an educator, I love hearing from my kids and, you know, you're like, do you remember me? Of course, like you guys are part of my soul and my past and my, you know, you're kind of like a parent, especially in the four-year sequences, you become a parent and an educator at the same time.

Me: Do you still do, I'm assuming you still do your own work, and how do you find time to balance work, and your own work, and your family?

Mrs.Mead: It's really hard. So, through the years, like during, in the summer, I would take classes at the art center up in the Thousand Islands, where my family would vacation, and that was my time. I would make, like, a painting a summer, and, because there's no time for me, you know, but other art teachers find a lot of time. Like, Mrs.Utt* does, she's really heavy into her photography, and she finds a lot of time to do it, and Mrs. Norris** does a lot of stuff in the summer, and then she shows sometimes, like she, I think she did six pieces last year for a show, but for me, I find it a struggle, you know.

Me: I remember doing, like, painting the hallway, the lockers into buildings, and, like, painted in your classroom. Have you continued to do murals with the students, and if so, what?

Mrs.Mead: So, um, our hallway is full, and a lot of those have been there probably since your time. There have been some updates, um, but I would say that Art Club does most of the murals, and, um, they do it around the school you know, so does it happen? Yeah, it happens, but a lot of stuff has already been done, that's already there, it is staying there, and then it depends on your principal. Like, we have... Dr. Strong*** moved up to, um, the high school now from the middle school, and, you know, he's, he likes things, like, you know, clean and painted, so it depends on who your administration is.

Me: Yeah, I get that feeling

Mrs.Mead: You know, the issue also is that sometimes, like, what we found with the clubs and the murals, because that's usually falls under clubs, is that, you know, the kids just aren't, like, they're not committed to following through, so then you end up gets, you end up getting stuck trying to finish it for them. Um, you know, and so that can be a challenge, especially at the elementary school. Yeah. You do a lot of heavy lifting there.

Me: Yeah I remember you were at West Hollow for a year, and then you went up to that high school. Was that, your choice, or did they need you there, or?

Mrs.Mead: Yeah, that happens. They transferred me. Um, I, it was not my choice, but it ended up being the best choice.

Me: Cool. Yeah,

Mrs.Mead: I really enjoy, you know, I, I really enjoy the fact, I enjoyed through the years modifying my program, developing my program. Um, you know, it, it's, it's really evolved a lot since I've started, and so I'm glad that the choice was made for me.



Mrs.Mead's classroom.

Exactly the same and yet completely different than it was *mumblemumble* years ago. I painted this door my senior year. It has since been painted over by other talented artists.