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Life takes VISA



Sharon Tiffin/Victoria News

Susan Feilders works on her collage working with needle and thread and coloured pencils at the Vancouver Island School of Art Saturday.

By Matthew Gauk Victoria News

The Vancouver Island School of Art puts down new roots in the Quadra Street village neighbourhood. It's a little rough around the edges, but the old heritage schoolhouse on Quadra between Bay and Kings has the potential to be a real beauty with a little help from its new artistic-minded tenants. The Vancouver Island School of Art moved into the abandoned building in the Quadra Village neighbourhood in September of last year.

Executive director Wendy Welch, a sculptor who taught at the Victoria College of Art for seven years, started VISA in 2004 in a commercial space on Johnson Street but found it lacked the sense of neighbourhood and community she was looking for. "I noticed the building was empty and it was so beautiful," Welch said. "And I love this neighbourhood. It's the kind of neighbourhood where you actually see people walking around at night, going to the movie theatre, walking to a restaurant."

VISA now has four large classrooms and two small ones, as well as a darkroom and a woodworking shop. The school, which started with 47 students and four instructors, now averages 120 students a semester and has seven instructors. It offers courses on a part-time basis to students who work towards either a certificate of visual arts or a diploma of fine arts. Students can sign up for a single class, take a weekend workshop, or take a minimum of two courses a semester in each program.

"I don't think there is any place similar to this," said Lorraine Douglas, a retired librarian who commutes all the way from Sidney just for a collage class at VISA. "It's a great place to come and it has everything - it has a library, they offer studio time. Some people will come down and use these facilities because not everyone has a space in their home to do art." One of the school's main goals is to reach out to the community and to that end, it has many no-charge events open to the public, such as artist talks and lectures. It also boasts the Slide Room Gallery, where students and community members can exhibit their work on a weekly basis.

"I wanted to make an art school where people feel anybody could drop in, where they could come in and walk around and look at magazines," Welch said. "My experience is that some people feel intimidated. They think that art

school is for special people, and I just want it to be an ordinary place. My underlying philosophy is that everybody is interested in making something." Students can take courses in a variety of subjects. In "Painting a Neighbourhood," they walk around the Quadra-Hillside area and make sketches of architecture, planters, and light fixtures and then return to the classroom to make watercolour paintings from their sketches. Another course introduces students to printmaking in the tradition of the Victorian scrapbook. Workshops cover subjects like contemporary darning, gilded miniatures and text in art.

VISA is, at heart, a community art school. Welch has lived in big cities, from Los Angeles to Montreal to Vancouver, and is of the opinion that when people care about where they live, it shows. That's part of the reason she moved her school to the Quadra-Hillside area. It reminds Welch of that "dynamic, urban feel" of larger cities and she is enamoured of the growing sense of community there, even in a place of such diversity (it has a Caribbean bakery, Dutch store and Japanese restaurant just down the street). "So there's a paradigm in the way people think of Victoria as stodgy and provincial, but really if pioneers have enough audacity, they can push these kinds of ideas through," Welch said.

VISA's roots are running ever deeper. Welch has made her school an integral part of the annual Quadra Village Day and is developing relationships with other community leaders. Victoria-Hillside MLA Rob Fleming has art from VISA on the walls in his campaign office. Fifth Street Bar and Grill has brochures from the school and donates materials for VISA garage sales, and city council members have reportedly said that VISA shouldn't have to pay the school board rent for the old school building because it's doing a community service.

The building itself used to be the subject of constant vandalism and the school board used to have to send someone over once a month to fix broken windows. Welch thinks the community is happy the 10,000- square-foot space is finally being used. "We haven't had any vandalism," she said. "There's a sense that people care about the place." Those who might have otherwise vandalized the building are one of the target audiences of the art school. People who are scared of taking art classes, people who can't afford them, or are too busy working or have kids at home - those are the folks that Welch wants. Her school is a great place, she said, for "people who don't fit into regular things."

"It's one thing for me to say, 'Oh I want to make an art school for everyone,' but at the same time an art class costs \$325," Welch said. "So that right away is going to eliminate a large group of people." That's why she's been trying to develop a community scholarship program for students who can't afford to take art classes. She's been in discussion with the Blanshard Community Centre to split the costs of the scholarship in order to involve more local kids. Right now, roughly 30 per cent of the enrolment comes from the immediate community.

"I also have a strong belief that art gives kids confidence. For example, high schools are so big, in some schools they don't even know when a kid comes to class or not, so they're really kind of an anonymous person. But if you go into an art class and make something, you have direct evidence that you can do something." Just by sitting down and drawing, a teenager can become engaged and feel part of a group, according to Welch. It gives them a connection and a physical manifestation of their time.

VISA also has a bursary exchange program for those who can't afford a class. One man who's on disability takes a 36-hour class and then does 36 hours of work, which in his case involves going around town distributing brochures. The impact that VISA has had on the community is obvious, once you know where to look. Some of Welch's students worked on the Burnside-Gorge mural and one designed the new downtown banners. When there's a Saturday event, the school advises the cafe across the street so it can schedule more staff. Students can often be found shopping in Quadra Street thrift stores.

"I think there's more of a struggle involved," said Susan Feilders, an elementary school teacher and VISA student. "In a way, the neighbourhood is a drawback because it's not more affluent to fund things, but on the other hand (the school) is a catalyst to improving the neighbourhood."

VISA will likely receive accreditation in September, said Welch, who adds that it will enable students to get loans and allow the possibility of funding from the B.C. Arts Council. The long-term plan, over the next five to seven years, is for the school to get university transfer credit.

For more information on the Vancouver Island School of Art, visit the website, <http://www.vancouverislandschoolart.com/>.
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Art Incognito at VISA

Sept. 8, VISA will have its first major fundraiser - Art Incognito. Well-known local artists have donated original pieces to be anonymously shown with the work of VISA students. There will be a silent auction with a minimum bid of \$100.

Art enthusiasts won't know if they're bidding on the work of Robert Bateman or the work of an undiscovered talent. Tickets are \$25 for the public and \$10 for VISA students. Visit the Art Incognito website at <http://www.artincognito.com/>.

Editor's note: The features on this page were originally to run last Friday in the Victoria News, Esquimalt News, Oak Bay News, Goldstream News Gazette and Peninsula News Review. An error at our press resulted in other material running in place of what was intended. We apologize to our readers for any confusion.

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