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Local art teachers get their hands dirty at WKU's pro development day

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Charles Hurst (right), founder of the Kentucky Forge Council, instructs J (left) of South Warren High School how to forge a metal spiral keychain.

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The arts were on full display at Western Kentucky University on Wednesday morning as area teachers dug into some hands-on learning opportunities.

WKU's Department of Art & Design hosted its professional development workshop this week, giving art instructors from local middle and high schools an opportunity to build new relationships and dip their toes in a variety of creative mediums.

"It's really important to us to build connections and bridges and relationships with the community of teachers in this area," said department chair Kristina Arnold. "We have amazing art teachers in the area, and it's fun for us to get together and get our hands dirty again."



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Attendees got a taste of blacksmithing, carved molds for metal casting, practiced drawing the human hand and tried out the technique of fresco painting.

Arnold said the event, now in its second year, was spearheaded by South Warren Middle School's Paul Johnson.

"He came to us with the idea of doing an art-specific professional development workshop, and I think the art teachers don't necessarily get to have their hands on stuff," she said. "We're all artists to begin with, and (by) feeding that creative inner spirit, we're trying to give them that gift of being an artist again."

Johnson, who created an octopus-shaped metal casting mold Wednesday, said he just wanted to give art teachers in the region a chance to collaborate.

"It's kind of giving teachers here an opportunity to see what WKU has to offer and also give us the opportunity to create some cool art," Johnson said. "After all, Western is our regional school and we have all this fantastic faculty and staff here. It's a shame not to take advantage of it."

Melissa Willett teaches visual arts at Greenwood High School and just wrapped up 19 years of instruction. She said she came to earn needed professional development hours but also to connect with peers.

"There's of course the Warren County teachers, but I feel like each year we get to meet new teachers," Willett said.

She said art education provides a career path that defies the stereotypical image of the starving artist.



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“I do think that (by) having an art department in a school, you’re giving kids a different way to use their brain,” she said. “Obviously, not everyone fits the mold to become a doctor or a lawyer, so you want to give people a chance to develop and create and make something into a career.”

The development day even drew teachers from across state lines. Emma Utley just completed her first year of teaching art at Portland High School and made the trip from Tennessee to network with fellow teachers at her alma mater.

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help, that’s what I had to learn,” Utley said about her first-year experience. “I was too nervous or too shy and should have asked for help more because I have a great support system there.”

Nickie Hayes teaches at Morgantown Elementary and spent the morning carving a casting mold shaped like intertwined feathers.

Before she transitioned to the arts, she was a regular classroom teacher. Hayes said she enjoyed how students took to their art classes compared to other subjects.

“It’s still stressful, it’s just a different kind of stress,” Hayes said. “It’s a lot more fun to see kids enjoying their work.”

Caroline Dunson teaches at Russellville Middle School and, like Utley, just capped off her first full year of instruction. She created a fish-shaped mold.

She said events like WKU’s development day allow art teachers, who may be alone on an island in their respective schools, to chat, bond and commiserate over shared experiences exclusive to their roles.

“Art teachers are usually the only ones at their school, so you don’t have other art teachers you can talk with,” Dunson said. “If you teach math or any other subject, you have other teachers who teach that with you. Not with art.”

Terrance Brown, dean of the Potter College of Arts & Letters, said the development day is just another way teachers can forge community.

“They have an opportunity to build with others and know they’re facing similar issues, similar problems, and it strengthens them when they go back,” Brown said. “They have enough power in their battery to get through the next academic year.”

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