

EKU PROFESSOR RECEIVES ART EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD

RICHMOND, KY. – Dr. Gay Sweely has traveled around the world extensively and lived and taught on two continents and an island nation – in three different countries.

She has earned three doctoral degrees in Art History, Architectural History, and Oceanic Art History.

She has taught in three academic departments on campus – Art & Design, History, and GSO – teaches on KTLN/ITV to three ECU centers (every semester, including summers), advises Undeclared students, works as a mentor with the Student Success Institute, and is an advisor to three student organizations, including the ECU men’s rugby team. Additionally, she “specializes” in assisting Art majors with graduate school applications, writing approximately 30 letters of recommendation per year.

Recently, she received the Art Educator of the Year Award (higher education) for Kentucky, 2005, from the Kentucky Art Education Association.

But her greatest contribution to Eastern Kentucky University and its students can be summed up in two simple words, as suggested by Herb Goodman, chair of the University’s Department of Art & Design: “She cares.”

Perhaps that explains why Sweely chooses to display, on her Campbell Building office wall, the words of Eliese Buxton: “Teaching is Not Just Hard Work. It is Heart Work.”

With boundless energy and enthusiasm, she approaches every class and each student or mentee with a passion for the subject matter and a love for helping students to see all forms of beauty in the world around them.

For Sweely, teaching has always been more a life’s calling than a job. It all goes back to her childhood in Chicago, where, as a child, she used to color in her mother’s coffee table book on the Great Masters of Art. At age 10, she started weekend and summer classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. At an eighth-grade Career Day, the sign on her desk read simply “Art Professor.”

Her teaching career began in 1980 at Northern Virginia Community College, the second largest community college system in the US. She followed her husband, when he was transferred to New Zealand in 1988, and taught art history at the University of Canterbury. Then, after the family moved to Australia three years later, she began a 10-year stint as a lecturer and research assistant at the University of Ballarat, where she taught Art History, Critical Literacy, and Australian History – and mentored college Aboriginal students.

When Sweely settled in the Bluegrass State in 2000, she began to research teaching prospects at various area campuses. A springtime visit to a Richmond campus, awash in brightly colored blooms, sealed her fate – “the campus beautiful.”

If she “picked the school because of the flowers and ambiance,” Sweely has stayed and blossomed for many other reasons.

“I have the very best job in the whole wide world – I know, I’ve been there – and I’m teaching at the very best place on earth! We have the best teachers here I’ve met in my whole life, and they are interested in our students. You don’t see that everywhere.”

Part story-teller, part historian, Sweely teaches Art Appreciation and various Art History classes at the undergraduate and graduate level, as well as Australian History. She said that she especially enjoys instilling in non-Art majors a new appreciation for the role of art in their daily lives. Increasingly, she employs technology in her classroom presentations, freeing more of her time for research, thinking, reflecting, and writing.

“Professor Sweely is a walking definition of ‘scholar/educator’ and one of the elements that makes ECU legendary as a great place to work and learn,” Goodman said. “She has a deep understanding of her area and the unique ability to easily communicate complex ideas to her students.”

Sweely is no less passionate about her mentoring students of various academic majors through the University’s Student Success Institute. Some of her mentees are on the football and track teams, and with majors in biology, education, and psychology; Brandy Begley, a graduating senior in biology, has stayed close to Sweely since her freshman days at ECU.”

On her philosophy of teaching, Sweely says, “I’m at the age where I need to give in return what everyone else has given to me.” That’s why she also assists with Kentucky’s annual state Science Fairs – after winning 23 awards in high school, including national and international awards, Sweely sees her service to this area as yet another way to give assistance to students.

In addition to the rugby team, Sweely also advises the ECU Wesley Foundation and the Kappa Pi art honorary association, as well as her long-time service to Phi Kappa Phi, the oldest and most prestigious all-university honor society in the US.

Sweely earned a bachelor’s degree at Illinois Wesleyan University, a master’s at the University of Utah, and doctoral degrees from the University of Canterbury and the University of Melbourne.

If her name sounds familiar, her very social youngest son, Chad, is a senior Bachelor of Individualized Studies major (Web Design) at ECU. With Gay Sweely, “students do come first.” The Kentucky award of “Art Educator of the Year” validates Sweely’s passion for art history “for all students” at ECU.