



Cleansing the Palette

This is really hard... how do I begin the last Palette I will be writing as your Executive Director?

I have a note to myself here. It says, “At the end of the day, it’s about the relationships—the conversations, the unspoken exchanges, the meaningful connections.” It was the first thought that came to mind sent straight from my heart! And not just because relationships are the foundation of all we have managed to accomplish these past 12+ years. I mean, how many times have you heard me say the word *community*?

These relationships that have powered this organization and led to breakthroughs in community building and trust are not simply strategic imperatives or policy initiatives. They’re part of our DNA. We are artists. We are all about seeing and appreciating relationships—visual, emotional, communal. It was perhaps the easiest part of my job: creating the channels and platforms for member connection.

So, as I plan to leave my post as Executive Director in January, there is great confidence in knowing that the relationships that have been so key to NAEA’s growth and accomplishments these past 12 years will persist and continue to expand and multiply and strengthen. From its earliest moments, NAEA has been built on relationships, and the state of this organization is stronger than ever. I will leave you in good hands—your own.

I actually see our community as a work of art, evolving from the perspectives seen through all of our eyes. It is more than an org chart, more than regions and divisions, more than a calendar of events. It is a living, breathing, dynamic organism that dramatically symbolizes the truth behind the idea that $1 + 1$ can equal more than 2.

Some of you may know this story from when I interviewed as one of the two finalists for the Executive Director position. After an 8-hour day of interviewing with the NAEA Board of Directors, I was asked to give a brief speech following dinner. While the situation called for a recap of the day, conversations about the Board’s vision for NAEA’s future and how to get there, I saw this as an opportunity to go beyond the professional mask of “Executive Director candidate” to authentically expose the person they would be hiring, not just the role they needed filled.

So, I painted... as I gave my speech. I had a little tabletop easel off to the side, and after dinner, when it came time to deliver my remarks, I brought it to the table next to me and interspersed brushstrokes with vision statements and the mark making that would help us realize that vision. The painting’s been hanging in my office since February 2007—it is titled *The Interview*.

I share this story now because there’s a moral to it: Art is inextricably interwoven with life. We are more than teachers... and



Deborah B. Reeve, *The Interview*, 2007. Mixed media.

curriculum designers... and department heads... and museum educators. We are artists, even if we rarely pick up a brush or a chunk of clay. We create agile minds, preparing the next generation that will need the ability to think creatively and consider many possibilities. We nurture the many ways to see the world differently. We create new perspectives that shape different conversations, lead to innovative solutions, and generate new levels of fulfillment and community.

Art is so much more than a discipline or a talent. It is a foundational aspect of our humanity. And we should never lose sight of that, no matter how burdensome and tedious we may find curriculum guidelines or administrators’ myopia or our students’ behavior from time to time. Art has always been about changing the world and amplifying our experience of it. We are art’s missionaries. We carry art’s message, a message too profound, too transformative to leave to chance or routine.

I could end with comments about our legacy over this most recent era or my confidence in the Board’s vision for the future. But these things all speak for themselves. While I have been humbled to serve as NAEA’s Executive Director, my tenure has never been about me. And this plays into how I came to this year’s theme of Continuing the Journey. Yes, I will be moving on, continuing my personal journey into new arenas of discovery and fulfillment. But it is your journey that I care about deeply—and will continue to care about regardless of where my life takes me.

The journey you are on is bigger than any one person, which is why it will continue to unfold and expand long after I’ve left the NAEA Gallery & Studio. This is a journey of community, not just the individual, and each of you has an opportunity to embrace that collective movement forward.

I am privileged and gratified beyond words to have been able to accompany you these past 12 years. I wish you all Godspeed as you continue on—and continually create—that path. ■



Deborah B. Reeve, EdD, Executive Director
NAEA, 901 Prince St., Alexandria, VA 22314
Email: dreeve@arteducators.org