

MoNA Moments: *Celebrating 20 Years of MoNA Link - A Conversation About Art Education*

Transcript provided by George Luo.

Welcome to MoNA Moments, a podcast hosted by the Museum of Northwest Art, located in La Conner, Washington. The Museum of Northwest Art resides on the lands of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. With gratitude, we honor the stewardship of these lands since time immemorial to present day. This land acknowledgement does not take the place of authentic relationships with indigenous communities.

This episode of MoNA Moments highlights the original vision and evolution of MoNA Link, MoNA's school partnership program, through a conversation with three individuals who shaped the program over the past two decades. You'll hear from the founder of the program, Margaret Grauf, a studio artist, currently living in Port Townsend. She was the first Education Director at MoNA, from 2000 to 2008. She has also worked as a music educator in the Washington State Museum of Art in Pullman, Washington and the John Michael Culler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. You will also hear the perspective of Christine Wardenberg Skinner who lives in Edison. She worked at the Museum of Northwest Art from 2010 to 2014 first as MoNA Link Education Director, then as the first Director of Outreach. She is a practicing artist and has spent the last four decades as an art educator in both Skagit and Whatcom counties. Finally, you will hear from Nicolette Harrington, the current coordinator of the MoNA Link program, and textile artist, painter, and printmaker working out of Wing Shadow studios, in La Conner. She has a masters in art education from the Mass College of Art. She was the art specialist in Fairfax county in Virginia and in Oak Harbor, Washington for many years.

This conversation is facilitated by Ellie Cross, MoNA's Community Outreach Coordinator. Thank you for listening to this MoNA Moment.

Ellie Cross: So we are going to start with introductions. Let's start with your name and the time you were involved with MoNA and what your title or capacity with MoNA was.

Margaret Grauf: My name is Margaret Grauf and I was the initial Education Director here at MoNA. Volunteers have been building a program prior, but I was the first one hired, and we decided that we wanted to do some sort of program that enabled the museum to reach out to the community more and also that would help to fill the gap that we noticed in the schools, which was that there were no art specialists in the schools, in the valley and many of the classroom teachers were being asked to teach art in the

classroom, and they didn't have the skills that they needed to do that. So we set up MoNA link as a professional development program for teachers.

My name is Chris Wardenberg Skinner, and I believe, I was the third MoNA Link Education Director and my background was that I came rather late to teaching, but I decided that since I practiced art as a ceramics artist, I went into art education. And what I feel like I brought to this job was a background in teaching art in the public school where I saw art as virtually nonexistent. I worked kind of as a specialist for art, and schools would hire me as an art educator in residence and so when I came here, it was putting that work into a really productive action. And in thinking about the study of art, what it provides for not only for children but anyone, it provides one of the most valuable records of insights, not only into our cultural history, but into expression for children in a way that often written words don't. A visual expression kind of uses a different part of the brain, and I think in all aspects of academia is applicable. So I found the program here to be one of enormous importance and interest to me.

Nicolette Harrington: I am Nicolette Harrington. I have been with MoNA Link for two and a half years now, starting with the closing of schools because of the pandemic. I was approached by a board member to help MoNA and bring my skills here. I have been an art teacher in the elementary schools for too long, 30 years, but I have a perspective that is really valuable for MoNA because I understand that if art education is to have a permanent role in schools, the subject needs to be fully explained and the impact understood, and there is just so much work to be done. So I really enjoyed working with my classroom teachers and developing strategies, bringing their kids to MoNA and just being delighted by how much appreciation there is for these opportunities to engage with real art and to be successful in making art.

Ellie: Okay, so our next question is, what were the vision and goals of MoNA Link during your time at MoNA? And we are going to go in chronological order, starting from the past.

Margaret: I think I already said about the vision and goals, right? Umm so what should I...

Ellie: Maybe you could talk about, for instance, how you started it a little bit and what you wrote in that grant that got it going.

Margaret: Ok ok. I forgot quite a few things from the first. I also forgot to say that I came into museum education through the backdoor of a studio artist, and I sort of grew with the program here. And we just started just brainstorming on a proverbial napkin. Kathy

Shoop was the Director of the Educational Service District and Maurine Harland who was with La Conner schools. We sort of penciled out a program that we thought would serve for both the museum and the schools and then took a big leap and wrote a grant. It was with the Institute of Library Services and it was for 104,000 dollars, which was huge and it was the biggest grant MoNA had ever gotten and we were so ecstatic when we got that because it enabled us actually to run the program as we envisioned it for three full years so we weren't scraping. We could really start on solid footing. Umm so the biggest challenge was to get money and then the second biggest challenge was to hire staff and so right when we needed somebody Tammer Tolison moved into the community from Yakama, and she proved to be a fabulous art educator, and so we were off and running.

Chris: Umm I followed Tamara and I didn't realize that she was the first actual art educator (I thought that had been you). Umm but she passed the torch to me, and my assistant was Jasmine Valodony, who was a very good artist, but had not worked in education, so we worked as a team. We had a number of teachers and we split them, we went out together for the first several times and then she gradually began to take several of those teachers, and I would take the others. But one of the first things that we did, it must have been our second year, is that we expanded the program to pre-school and I especially wanted to work with the Swinomish. So the Swinomish preschoolers came aboard, and I had a long involvement with the Burlington Middle School and so we brought that group on board really quickly. It was an independent school versus the tribe supported preschool and then, the next year we began thinking about the middle school, and we really it was more in the thinking stage but Jasmine really put the middle school program together, and I think we had made overtures to the schools. So the program it was like an elastic spread down and up slightly. So I can't speak to the middle school program because it was just the inception of it, but having the very young children in the school and working with both of the teachers who were marvelous and I don't know if you still do preschool school, but to have these very young children come in and go through this program was interesting. And the other thing, I'm an old English major from the beginning although art has always been in my life always but we introduced the program that I loved, which was after the tour, the children would choose a drawing and reproduce it and then write about why they chose it. Even the young ones, and we had lots of volunteers with the little ones, we would offer dictation skills. And the other thing we did was when the tour ended, which I felt was very valuable, we always shared every one of the artworks, which was solicited by applause and beaming faces. Even the children who were hesitant about it, everyone saw something and though there was some kind of verbal expression to go with it, the visual expression and the sharing of what they did, kind of coming out of the closet as an artist was always great, and I felt that the teachers as well, especially in the summer workshops, when

they realized how talented they were themselves and went away feeling the art educator and the only artists in the room, they were one as well, and that was huge.

Margaret: That was sort of a huge goal from the beginning and it was to help the teachers to see themselves as creative artists themselves, so that they could invent what they wanted in the classrooms.

Chris: They could take that torch and run with it.

Nicolette: When you talk with school administrators these days, they have so much on their plate. There are so many priorities that have exempted creative work in the classroom, so when I organized professional developmental training for these teachers, it's sometimes impossible to know where to start. I don't think of it as grade level training, I think of it as a life-level attitude about how art forms our lives and how we are formed by it. But (you know) just teaching the elements and principles of art is not enough, you actually have to apply them and see how artists make choices, you have to learn critical-thinking skills that help you understand the meaning behind some of the work and the effort that goes into the art and how intentional it is. It's a huge challenge, but (you know) whenever I have the opportunity to open up the box and provide materials, it just is a natural inclination that we have to speak through stuff to communicate our ideas externally and when I'm planning professional development sessions, and we have a whole day with the teachers, we often choose a topic and it's not art, it's math, it's science, it's social studies. It's local history and we propose projects that teach so much valuable information as the kids are engaged. Right now in the schools with social emotional learning being such a priority, when teachers have an art project, it allows kids to express their feelings and ideas in ways that they never imagined possible before. So I'm honored and thrilled in this capacity to help teachers to become comfortable with their own understanding of art and their role and helping young people become future artists.

Ellie: Wonderful. So I think we are going to open it up to a little more organic dialogue and you are welcome to talk about unique challenges that you faced and how the program evolved to meet them, what MoNA Link means to you. You might ask another question to another director and kind of just open it up a little bit...

Margaret: I just wanted to add a little bit more to what Nicolette was saying about the study of art, and I think to me what is really important about studying art is not just making art and using it as self-expression but also the ability that students and all of us get by taking something that wasn't there and envisioning it and creating it, and then this translates to whatever kind of endeavor one wants to create in life, whether it's a

new car design or feeling empowered to build a grocery store in a food desert, or figuring out how to take CO2 out of the sky. These are experiences with creativity and empowerment that you can get through the arts.

Chris: I would like to pick that up. I'm married, and my husband and I approach things in entirely different ways. He's a pattern person. He solves things through patterns. He figures them out where I am far more intuitive. I don't do well in math and certain language areas, but I see as a person who is addressing kids, children, who have equal diversity in their thinking and how for some a visual challenges is demanding but it met in these unique ways and I think in terms of students sharing their work with one another, and teachers in the same capacity sharing their work, these diverse approaches to the same problem is kind of mind-blowing. I think one of the challenges for me is that I am probably older than everybody else here and the technical skills needed that were increasingly part of the art education generally, our life generally, were challenging for me and that was hard for me in that I felt I couldn't keep up with the technology that was demanded, and so when I left, my colleague who was proficient in that it was kind of a difficult but natural transition. I think for a person kind of like myself who struggled with the technical side of it that it was great to just work with someone like Kim who is taking a lot of that onus. But I think that the greatest challenge for me was the technical part of it, which wasn't until the latter part of my tenure here.

Nicolette: Chris, if I could interrupt, you are bringing an amazing aspect of art education that sometimes doesn't get enough credit. Billions of dollars are generated from the computer industry, and designers, and animators, people in the film industry. That visual world that is surrounding all of us right now. To understand principles of design and the effect of color and the understanding of light and shadow. All of those things play so importantly in how effective those visual images are. So yes, we need more artists, we need more people who understand how to use technology.

Chris: Right and I think that deep history of the love of art history of all of the art elements. All of those aspects of design are just invaluable in terms of, I mean you can apply them visually to so many different subject areas. I mean, depicting history, we both have a great love of Jacob Lawrence and his migration series, which is just so relevant right now with migration now all over the world. Yeah, it's a rich tradition. I think the hardest aspect that we have been talking about in the schools is that they have such demands upon them, and they will see art as not relevant or is far more relevant than they know it is.

Margaret: I think the other aspect of the MoNA Link program that we haven't really touched on yet is the VTS, the Visual Thinking Strategies, and actually looking at real

works of art as opposed to small images on a phone, in a computer, or in a printed book, but actually coming into the museum and seeing a work of art in scale where you can go around it and be confronted with something that is much larger than yourself and then discussing it with your peers in a way that really demands that you think critically, you supporting your ideas with evidence, that you observe carefully, that you respectfully debate your ideas and come to some mutual understandings. These are all things that have implications far beyond the gallery and far beyond art education. They can be applied anywhere.

Ellie: Ok, so our final question is what dreams do you have for the future of MoNA Link? We can start chronologically from the past and if it gets organic then that's wonderful.

Margaret: Ok this is Margaret again. So I guess my actual dream for MoNA Link- and this probably sounds really heretical - I really wish that the MoNA Link could finish its task and that it wouldn't need to be in existence anymore. Umm that every class in the valley would come and visit the museum regularly and that every classroom in the valley would be using VTS regularly in the classroom, and that students would have multiple, multiple chances to work with their hands, work with their eyes, build things, create things, express themselves boldly and freely.

Chris: Umm this is Chris. I think I can hardly top what Margaret just said. I agree with that completely. I believe so profoundly that the ability to visually express combined with thoughtful pursuit of history or language is just so rich and so my hope, I totally accept and understand what Marg says that if the program continues, then it just continues that richness of facets of how to see and how to express.

Nicolette: Thanks Chris. I have to end this by saying that an art education program belongs at MoNA forever and ever because we have the original pieces that you can't replicate in any other form and it's that authentic experience that gives people a sense of vitality. I see kids get so excited when they see how big something is, or they realize "oh they did it this way, I didn't know that", and there's just opportunities for real learning and the memory that's imparted because of their engagement, you really can't test, but you can feel, you can see, you can watch. Umm so I feel really honored to be part of this program and I don't want it to go away. I want it to continue to provide the rich experience that it has been able to impart with teachers along the way. Maybe it's ten, twenty teachers every year, but there is a ripple effect, and it's really exciting.

Margaret: Despite having said that it should work its way out of its existence, maybe a better way of saying that it evolves in a different way so that what we are saying of having students in the gallery, looking in the gallery can't be replicated by anywhere

else, and personally I'm very just delighted that after 20 years, MoNA Link is still here and evolved in so many ways of with the Outside In gallery, the database of lesson plans and other kinds of outreach to the community. So kudos!

Nicolette: I would love to thank you for starting this program and giving me this opportunity, and I feel like I stand on that shoulder of giants, so thank you.

Chris: Well I feel the same way about Marg. I think it's a wonderful day of the origins of the program, and I agree with the fact that it is alive and well. It's just marvelous and in such good hands.

Nicolette: That means a lot. Thanks

Margaret: Well, in a very good hands.

MoNA Link is a two-year professional development program for teachers focused on art education that offers multiple teacher training days as well as museum visits and classroom visits with standards based integrated art lessons for their students designed by museum educators. Established in 2003, this program is a partnership between the Museum of Northwest Art and local school districts, designed to provide comprehensive art education for students ranging from Pre-K to High School. Since its start in 2003, the MoNA Link program has served over 8953 students and provided training for 181 teachers and school districts throughout Skagit, Whatcom, and Island counties. MoNA Link encourages students to be confident communicators, engaged listeners, active observers and creative problem solvers. Thank you for listening to this MoNA Moment.