

## Munroe's Laurel Smith Creates a Safe Space for Teens

By Pamela Rice, MCA



As the sun filters through the expansive windows of Munroe's art gallery from the southwest, words of wisdom flow from Laurel Smith with ease, grace and a warm eloquence that leave me feeling like I am being rocked in the comforting cradle of a kind and loving soul. We are discussing her rich history and background, her paths in life, and all things that have led her here, to her passion and life's work - helping teens to connect with themselves and each other, courageously develop a learner's mindset, and find self expression and a voice through making art.

It's early afternoon on a Friday, and in a few short hours, she will be teaching her after school

Drawing and Painting Studio for Teens class, that she has aptly titled "In Your Hands." She began teaching the class in 2014, and explains the genesis of its name as follows. "Teens are fabulous, fascinating and fraught. Art is a language that they are speaking. Ultimately, an artist takes their own instincts and priorities into their own hands as they mature. Their future is in their hands."

She continues to explain how she takes great pride in creating a safe space for her teen students. "Teens are growing into themselves and it is challenging. As they share the language of art with me, we build a connection on many levels. All of my students are respected and valued. I consider it a privilege to teach all kinds of kids. All levels of talent and ability are welcome. My class is a community and my students learn to respect each other and each other's differences. They also learn to respect their own learning process. Developing teens need a safe space, and my class and Munroe Center provide that."

We delve into her background and talk about what brought her to Munroe. Hers is a history replete with the Arts. She credits her parents for providing a culturally and artistically rich childhood environment, and for recognizing her personal artistic talent when she was a young child. "My father loved music, art and literature. I was aware culturally, artistically and musically from a very young age. I can remember being very young and laying under our family stereo system, listening to Ravel's *Bolero*. I also remember being the only child at our local painting school at less than ten years old. The adults there validated me and took me seriously. I thank my mother for seeing my talents and abilities and giving me that opportunity," she tells me.

She went on to earn a BFA from the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts), while auditing many Botany courses at the University of Pennsylvania. She found herself so interested in nature and natural phenomenon, that when she completed art school, she became a successful Science Illustrator, a career which she enjoyed for three decades. Her notable accomplishments from that period in her life include illustrating for Horticulture Magazine, collaborating to build a Department of Art Development at a major publishing house, and working on a Genetics text book with a Nobel Prize winning team. "I began by designing scientific educational materials for younger children. I went on to design high school and college level teaching visuals, breaking down complex processes into steps. I worked closely with scientists, to understand the concepts that I was illustrating. I was fascinated by the natural phenomena themselves and loved making it all work as a visual for lay people to understand," she shares with me.

She went through a period of profound self-reflection, and found Munroe Center to be a welcoming sanctuary during that time. She joined an extremely supportive women's art collective at the Center, and began to move away from realism and the translation of science into art. She began working with some dream images, and found that process powerful and upending. She describes trips to the beach to photograph natural phenomena, and using nature during this time as a springboard to more abstract work. She explains this personal awakening to me, saying, "It became symbolic of what was going on inside of me. I was in a personal retreat, and things in nature were so tender and calming to work with. Any detail can be a lifting off point. Everything is deserving of curiosity."

When the person teaching the Teen Drawing and Painting Studio class at Munroe stepped away from that role, Laurel was a natural fit. At that time, the class was focused on realism. She continued the curriculum of realism, but augmented it with abstract and symbolic subject matter and technique. "I have the technical ability to meet my students wherever they are. If they want to be highly realistic, I'm there. But, really good teaching is a balance of the technical and the emotional, and both appeal to me," she says.

As a longtime active participant and champion of the Arts scene in Lexington, she feels a deep loyalty to the Munroe Center and a desire to see the Center succeed far into the future. She describes Munroe's current Executive Director, Cristina Burwell, as "a very rare type of a person, filled with clarity, caring and commitment." She goes on to explain that, "Every town needs a community arts center. Munroe Center is a haven for my students. It is a calm and tranquil place. After being expected to meet other's requests all week, my students get to let all of that go and pay attention to self care and self expression. My class and the Center serve a social and emotional purpose across ages, ethnicities, and learning styles."

It's now nearly two hours after we first sat down to talk, and her comforting words are still flowing. "I feel a loyalty to the Munroe Center and my students, because this is where I started my teaching process, and this is where I've grown it," she says in a way that seems to come from her marrow. As we close out our afternoon conversation, I feel uplifted, honored and blessed to have spent this precious quality time with Laurel. I am entirely certain that her students must feel the same way about her.