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Artist collaborates with Beaverton church in interactive art project

BY KRISTEN FORBES

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Nicole Gibbs is an artist in every sense of the word: She has degrees in painting, art history, ceramics and sculpture (a BA from Hamline University, post-baccalaureate certificate from Oregon College of Art and Craft and an MFA from Ohio State University). She is currently a visiting professor at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., where she teaches 2D Art. She was the John Cavanaugh Sculpture Fellow at Ohio State from 2007 to 2008, a guest curator at The Museum of Contemporary Craft in 2005 and a guest artist and presenter at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in 2007.

Recently, she was the inaugural artist-in-residence for a week at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Beaverton, where she was able to bring her artist's vision of "making the invisible visible" come to life in February by collaborating with members of the St. Andrew community to create a temporary sculpture of quilts and other handmade items.

"We were interested in bringing a theologian, musician or artist into the community, and with Nicole we already had a special connection," explains Reverend Mark Brocker.

Gibbs was a member at St. Andrew from 2001 to 2007, when her husband Todd was the director of youth and family ministry.

When Gibbs read an essay by Margaret Mead entitled "Art and Reality: From the Standpoint of Cultural Anthropology," she connected with Mead's ideas about the differences between western and primitive art in the sense that western art was often separated from culture and not a part of everyday reality. Mead used Catholic Mass as one example of a break in this and Gibbs tried to come up with an example from her own life, as well, that tied everyday life and art together in a way that others could appreciate.

"St. Andrew was the first thing that came to mind," Gibbs says, recalling how each year a group of church members who call themselves the Nifty Notters would make quilts for the graduating high school seniors. Quilters called the seniors to identify their favorite colors, then spent several months working on the quilts that were then presented to the seniors at a celebratory graduation service at the end of the school year.

"These women would put so much time, care and creativity into the making of these items that then became so important to the people who received them," Gibbs says.

In talking to the Nifty Notters, Gibbs learned that from the years 2001 to 2009, the women made and gave away 2,140 quilts – to high school seniors, parents of new babies, nonprofit organizations and more. Likewise, prayer shawls were often stitched together and given to members going through loss, celebration, or life transitions. Gibbs connected with the idea of the church members being artists, collaborating with one another as they offered up their handmade items of care.

When Brocker asked Gibbs to be the first artist-in-residence, she came up with "Interwoven: Making visible the fabric of care within the community of St. Andrew." During her week at the church, she taught

a digital photography workshop, gave a free lecture, and then invited church members to be a part of her collaborative sculpture.

On Sunday, Feb. 14, church members were asked to bring their items of care – the quilts, shawls and more – that had been made for them by past and present St. Andrew members. The idea was that as the pews filled with the colors of the quilts, as the sounds became muffled with all the fabric in the room, and as the collective mood inside the church shifted, members would suddenly become aware of what has always invisibly been there: a huge and generous love, stitched in fabric, made with care.

“As I’m starting to realize now when I look back,” Gibbs says, “my work has always had a common thread: I want to make the invisible visible.”

“Interwoven” was not only an opportunity to make the invisible visible, but a chance for church members to collaborate in the process of making art, as well. In addition to the one-day temporary quilt sculpture, Gibbs asked members to take photos with their quilts, which she will compile until April and self-publish online.

“What she’s showing us, through this, is totally obvious,” Brocker says. “But you don’t really appreciate it until it’s pointed out.”

“There are so many meaningful and interesting ways people spread this web of care,” Gibbs says. “How can we make this network visible, bring it from the outside in?”

On Feb. 14, Gibbs found her answer to this question. She transformed a room, she brought together a community, and she made everyone around her feel like an artist for a day.

St. Andrew Lutheran Church is located at 12405 S.W. Butner Road in Beaverton.

(Kristen Forbes is a freelance writer. To view her blog, visit www.krissymick.blogspot.com.)

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