

Notre Dame Prep products follow art teacher's footsteps

By Elizabeth Skalski

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TOWSON – Kate Martiyan remembers being in a creative slump in art class near the end of her senior year of high school in 1993, but it didn't last long.

That day, Susanne Nichols, Martiyan's art teacher at Notre Dame Preparatory School, slammed her hands on the desk, cranked up the opera music, wrapped herself in drapery, stood on a desk and started dancing.

"We felt like we were in kindergarten again and it made us want to be creative," said Martiyan, 34. "It got those creative juices flowing."

Martiyan and Anne Walker, 47, are both art teachers at the Towson school. They are former students of Nichols' – and now her colleagues. Martiyan has been teaching at NDP for 12 years, Walker for 13.

Nichols, another NDP alumna, is in her 51st year of teaching there.

Both Martiyan and Walker reconnected years ago with Nichols, who urged them to apply for openings in the art department.

"It's always good to have someone who is organized and talented (as a teacher)," said Nichols, 78.

Walker remembers "loving art since I was a little girl," an interest she said Nichols encouraged.

"She taught me lessons about life as well as making art," Walker said. "What I admire is her sense of humor in life lessons."

Martiyan and Walker said Nichols teaches her students the fundamentals, then pushes them to find their own technique.

"I give them the skills, and kick them off the pier so they can fly," Nichols said.

"(She teaches her students) how to look at the world in a different way," said Martiyan, who said she uses a similar approach with her students. "She teaches you not to look at yourself so seriously."

When Martiyan teaches points of view to her photography students, she said she'll lie on the ground and have her students stand on their desks to get a bird's eye view; then she stands on a desk and her students sit on the floor to get a bug's eye view.

Students might laugh and ask if they can really stand on their desks, but "it has stuck with them," Martiyan said.

It is about "breaking the rules and the structure, but not in a bad way," said Nichols, who sets an example for her colleagues by keeping up on the latest graphic design technology.

"I am curious, I have a rapid mind," said Nichols, a self-taught artist who pushes herself to learn new skills. She has no plans of slowing down or retiring anytime soon.

Walker said Nichols' modern approach "shows in the girls who graduate." Some of the NDP graduates who visit the school during college break say they have a leg up on their classmates because they arrive at college knowing how to use some graphic design software.

Nichols is a "very tough teacher with the purpose of being brutally honest; that's how it should be," said Martiyan, recalling lessons that resonate. "It was that push that 'you can do better, you can do more.' "