Ursuline art history teacher keeps students engaged with stories

By Steve Novak
Pepper Pike

Ursuline College assistant professor Elisha Dunser stands in front of a class with the expressed purpose of telling her students a story. Often, the characters in that story date back to the first century. She holds a doctorate in art history. Her class topics include works of art which date back to the golden years of Rome. She insists that it isn’t that difficult to keep her students interested in a topic that is sometimes 2,000 years old.

“I teach through telling good stories,” she said. “Everything I do is storytelling. The people I talk about come alive from the stories I’m telling about them.”

Dunser has been telling her stories so well that she was honored twice last year. She was one of the people selected on a list of outstanding area educators which was published by Ohio Magazine.

Then, shortly before the end of 2011, Dunser was given Ursuline College’s annual Teaching Excellence Award. This title is given on the basis of nominations and voting by students at the Pepper Pike College.

The 40-year old Dunser has been teaching at Ursuline since 2000. A native of Maryland, she earned her Master’s degree at Case Western Reserve University. She did her doctoral work at the University of Pennsylvania.

Art history wasn’t a lifelong passion for Dunser. While she was an undergraduate at Ohio State University, she took part in an archeological dig in Turkey.

“We were in a part of Greece that had a Roman bath building. I got to go into the room where the fires burned to keep the baths warm. There was still ash from the fires there. There is no experience like that,” she said. “That was it. I said, ‘I’m going into art history. This is what I’m doing.’ I had been majoring in business before that.”

Dunser has also collaborated on a book called “Mapping Augustan Rome.” The text is a study of Roman archeology, and it includes a detailed look of Rome in the first century. The book offers a map which highlights everything from the location of Roman officials’ homes to the outlay of roads throughout the city.

“I liked art history,” she said. “It gives you a window on to other cultures.”

Dunser said that there is one aspect of this book which she tries to incorporate into each one of her classes at Ursuline. She said the book was a combined effort, and that it is a quality which she feels is essential to any study of an ancient culture. The collaboration usually has no trouble getting started in her classes at Ursuline.

“I usually have 15 students in my classes,” she said. “They are very interactive. There is a lot of dialogue, with them asking questions of me and me asking questions of them. Usually, by the end of the first class (of the semester), there is that interest. When you are curious to learn, they are open to learning. But it starts with curiosity.”

Judy Forward, a history major, is one of the students who nominated Dunser for the teaching excellence award. She has already taken two of Dunser’s courses.

“Her (Dunser) makes her subject come alive. She is so enthusiastic that you’re drawn to her teaching,” Forward said. “She really has the gift to teach. She gets so excited by the subject that you get excited, too.”

Novak is a freelance writer.

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