Phillip VanderWeg: Leading the School of Art and East Hall Studios

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WMU Emeriti Director School of Art Phillip VanderWeg

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In-Person at Heritage Hall

**Cassie:** All right, so I'm recording now.

**Phil:** Okay.

**Cassie:** Okay, so go ahead and have you introduce yourself and then spell your last name for us.

**Phil:** I am Phil VanderWeg, V-A-N-D-E-R-W-E-G, V and W capitalized. I'm Emeriti Director School of Art, Western, and professor of Art at Western. I came here in 1989 to be the head of the department, and I retired in 2007.

**Cassie:** And where did you come here from?

**Phil:** I had been in Tennessee for 20 years, I had taught and been an administrator in Tennessee, but mostly taught and been a practicing artist there.

**Cassie:** So what brought you to Western?

**Phil:** The job. (Both laugh) I was familiar with I grew up in Southwest Michigan some of the time, and I was in Niles. I had a lot of friends that some had gone here to school that I had grown up with. I had some other relatives that had gone to school here.

My wife and I were familiar with the school in variety of ways. And so when the position became available, I was interested in it because I had family nearby and all that, yeah.

**Cassie:** So did you start out as the director then, or did you start out as a professor?

**Phil:** I came as professor. At that time it was a department, so I was chairman of the Department of Art later on. Then I was able to go ahead and get the change, so that it was a School of Art.

**Cassie:** Wow, and when was that?

**Phil:** That probably was around 1994, maybe ‘95 or so, someplace around the mid ‘90s.

**Cassie:** So what did that change look like for your department becoming a school?

**Phil:** There was not very much of a change. It was really in terms of how we were structurally. I mean, we should have probably been designated as a school far earlier, and I thought it was a real simple kind of thing.
But luckily, Roland Duma, who was in the provost office at the time, informed me that, no, it wasn’t simple, but yes, he would help me. And we went through the process. The name didn’t change anything structurally because of the complexity of our programs, the number of programs that we had that we granted both undergraduate and graduate.

That was in keeping with other divisions within the university that also would be referred to as a school, and it was consistent with what we would find nationally as well. And so, I had a lot of other examples to draw upon in terms of our National Crediting Association that said, well, yes, of course, you should be a school.

**Cassie:** So during the time that you were head of the department and then the school, where was the program located? Where was the School of Art located?

**Phil:** We were all over. And when I came, the majority of the teaching and operations taking place for the department in the School of Art were in Sangren Hall.

Not the Sangren Hall that we see today, but the old Sangren Hall. And then there was another building called Knollwood. There’s some apartments on top of that now. That was on one corner of the campus. That’s where ceramics and sculpture were. But in Sangren we had painting and printmaking, and drawing and graphic design, and art education, and art history, and all the things that went along with that.

And then there were a number of houses, old houses, that were in what was called the Knollwood area. Again, there’s some dormitory, not dormitories, but there’s some housing that is along that area now. And in those houses, a number of faculty had studios that they were using. There were a couple that were used by some students.

And then we had some other studios that were in Walwood Union, which wasn’t functioning as Walwood Union at that point. And I guess that’s about it. But the department, the population for the School of Art was probably more than double what it is right now.

**Cassie:** Wow, so it was bigger then?

**Phil:** Yeah, it’s a lot bigger.

**Cassie:** So how did that affect the program then?

**Phil:** Well, we were just bursting at the seams all over the place. We weren’t really able to go ahead and really do some of the things that we needed to do. Particularly, the majority of the students were involved with studio practice.

There were probably, maybe 25% of them might have been involved with art education in some way. They could have also been majoring in a studio area, but they were primarily involved with art education. Maybe 20% of the students then were involved with art history in some form or in a kind of major way.
So the rest were really primarily involved with major studio practice. Most of those were, whether it was graphic design, or painting, or drawing, or printmaking, or sculpture, or ceramics. Those students really needed to go ahead and have, not only a classroom where they were taught, but then they needed to have some kind of facility where they could go ahead and do the rest of the work that they needed to go ahead and do.

They couldn't take it home and do it in the dorm room, although some of them were trying to do that. And I would hear about that from the dormitory people. But they didn't really have too many choices. So we were really aggressively looking for other places that we could go, where we could go ahead and have better access or where students would be able to have better access to things.

There were probably two or three years there where I was constantly doing studies about whether or not we could move to this or we could move some of our operations to this place on campus or that place on campus or this place in town or that place in town.

Or could we do it in both of these things or move this part of it here and that part of it there, and what would be the consequences of doing that? And finally, I think we looked at where there was a combination of people that were in the administration that really understood what we actually needed as opposed to what they thought we needed.

And East Hall was being vacated at that time. There was a residual of people yet from the College of Business that were here, and they hadn't fully moved over into the new college of business yet. And there were emeriti faculty that had offices in here and other things.

So they decided to go ahead and archives had already been moved here. It was in what was the old gymnasium area, and the rest of it they were gonna go ahead and make available for us. It was an important time in terms of the facility being made available.

We desperately needed something. The other thing was that, I can look back on it now, it was a pivotal time in terms of what was actually taking place in terms of the practice of art. We needed spaces, we knew that, and we could maybe define it in one kind of way based on what had been going on with the students.

But our programs, really, the BFA program in particular, and the MFA program were really intended to help prepare students for a career in art as practicing artists. So that was really trying to prepare a student to be able to engage in a professional way in the future as opposed to going back to the past.

So we really needed to be on the forefront of what was really taking place. There were a lot of different transitions that were taking place. Digital photography, all that kind of stuff was just coming into being. Yes, there were still a lot of people that wanted to paint and draw, but
there were an awful lot of students that wanted to do a combination of things and have access to things and to make installations and do kind of a combination of performative art and an object based kind of thing. And we really didn’t have any place in Sangren Hall or wherever else that would allow us for students to experiment around and try and do that.

So when we came into East Hall, we were able to go ahead and convert some spaces so that they could go ahead and do that. And I think if you interview the students that were here at the time, they would say that I think that it was probably the best time in their lives.

They totally enjoyed it, that it was a real breakthrough for them in terms of being able to do the kinds of things that they felt they needed to do. And that when they got out that they learned were exactly what they needed to be doing.

**Cassie:** So what did that look like when the school occupied this building and how are things spread out? And where were the studios? What did those look like?

**Phil:** Well, it’s a combination of this space that we’re in here right now (Referring to the meeting places on the main floor). This was a rabbit’s nest of offices before, and so then it became a rabbit’s nest of student studio spaces, this kind of block space, was my best recollection.

There was at least probably one student that was in this space, and there was another all over. But then there were also a number of faculty that had their studios here because those buildings were torn down and then other faculty needed spaces. It didn’t work out as well for all faculty.

It kind of depended on what media and what materials and processes they were engaged in, because you couldn’t weld in here. You couldn’t do ceramics in this space. You couldn’t fire stuff. Although sometimes, students and faculty did maybe work with clay a little bit, but then they’d have to let it harden.

And then they could bring it on over to Noel Wooding and put it in a kiln and get it fired and do that, which is difficult, but there are times that people did stuff like that. So there was a
combination of what had been pretty good sized classrooms, maybe, that were then broken up.

So there might be four or five students that would have a space like that, and then maybe a similar kind of space across the hall might be occupied by a faculty member. And I had a big studio in that. I had a couple studios in here myself. I mean, I started out in one and then I went to another.

I was down there (pointing to one end of the building) at one time, but down this end on the other side, I had a pretty good size studio there for a long time. It allowed me to go ahead and get back to doing the kinds of things that I felt I needed to do and was accustomed to doing before I came here, where I was able to make some pieces and participate in some professional venues in Chicago and other places that I wouldn't otherwise been able to go ahead and do.

And that was the case on both floors. I mean, there were faculty studios on this first floor. There were some on the lower level. Below us, there was a big printmaking operation that was down below us where we had a letter press that we got donated to the university, which now resides in the Kalamazoo Book Arts. And Jeff was involved with that. But Paul Robert, Curtis Rhodes were involved with that. And Paul had a paper making operation that was also for himself, his own studio. But also his students that wanted to do paper making would do that downstairs with Paul. And yeah, so I can't remember exactly how many faculty studios there were, but there were a lot.

Down on the south end of the building, there was a kind of rotunda space and that was converted to a gallery. And then there was another room off of that where there was another gallery. So there were two distinctly different kinds of gallery spaces that they were very different architecturally.

So they afforded students different opportunities to go ahead and set things up. They worked pretty well as far as students really being able to go ahead and do some pretty intricate installations and things.

Cassie: Do you recall any installations or any shows that really stick out to you?
Phil: Well, bits and pieces. There were exhibits that I was particularly impressed with and students that have went on, they learned a lot and it was important to their getting into graduate school and then going on beyond that. Greg was a student that was involved with sculpture, but photography and painting and everything under the sun and eventually really became very involved with multimedia kind of installation things.

And he was an undergrad. And his exhibit, he had more than one. But I can remember I think it was his graduating exhibit in the rotunda space where he had been able to set up a cable system above that he could light things, but he could also suspend work and do things in a particularly unique way.

And he was really very clever and proficient about that kind of thing. And I think it went on to help Greg in terms of his graduate studies in Florida. And then he did some internships with MASS MoCA in Massachusetts and some other places and worked with some pretty high profile artists nationally.

But he sort of learned how to do that kind of thing on his own, figured it out and got consulted with a lot of people to help figure it out. But he was able to test that kind of thing out. And so in my view, that’s what we were supposed to be doing, was providing him with an opportunity to go ahead and do that.

And I think he took advantage of it, but that’s just one. I mean, there were a number of students. The problem with it all was that architecturally, it was very difficult to get things in and out, the different levels of floors, the access. There wasn’t a ramp situation.

It was nearly impossible to get somebody that was mobility challenged into the building and that was really a very sad situation more than once. Where there was a parent or somebody like that, of a student that was having their graduating exhibit in there. It was a very, very difficult, if not impossible, to get them into the building so that they could actually see what was going on.

It was also difficult to move things in and out of the space that you might be working with. And the building was kind of falling down around our years, that’s the other thing that it was not just drafty. I mean, the windows became guillotines in a way. I mean, where the systems of the window could break at any time and so you’ve got this great big sheet of glass or whatever crashing on down, yet you wanted it open because it was hot, so you had to do that.

You didn’t have potable water. None of the drinking worked in the building or whatever. It was dangerous to drink that. You couldn’t do it.
**Cassie**: So that was like, you guys were right at the tail end, right before the renovation tall. So it had to have been on its last legs then, right?

**Phil**: Well, they have a saying, I've heard it before at other places. “We are the landlords of last resort.” It's like, well, nobody else can do anything. We're gonna tear it down. So whatever they do to the building, we'll let them do that or get away with it.

Luckily, we did have some people that helped us a lot. I remember there was a janitor in particular that they worked the night shift and that's the only time that they would clean. But yours was reliably here. So if there was gonna be a problem or whatever, you could probably get him and he was right there.

His office or space that he had wasn't very far. It was kind of over in that area there. It was within yelling distance of where my studio was. Very, very late, early in the morning, one time when I was working on a piece and, I got stuck. I was putting this thing together and I couldn't move.

I needed some help and I hollered and he came and rescued me. I would hear from students that he would do the same thing for them once in a while if they got caught in the same situation.

**Cassie**: Well, we have just a minute left, so I'm wondering if you have any last thoughts or anything that we didn't touch on that you wanted to finish with?

**Phil**: No, it's a unique experience. I think it was a unique space and it was at a critical time I think in terms of the School of Art and it gave us a very important foothold in terms of what we really needed to do when we built a new building and the Richmond Center and the current School of Art.

So a lot of what went into that was informed by our experience that we had here in East Hall.

**Cassie**: Well, thank you so much for coming and meeting with me and talking with me today. I enjoyed meeting with you.