

northern NOW

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On the cover: Salina Govan of St. Louis and her daughter, Kristyahna Bradshaw, help decorate the Gateway Arch riverfront with birdseed art.

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ARTIST HELPS COMMUNITY BOND THROUGH ART

By Colleen Leonard



Jessica Witte, M.F.A.'04, is a nationally exhibited and award-winning artist. She also describes herself as a recovering control freak.

Witte is far from controlling these days as she makes a name for herself in the St. Louis art scene. In early June, she headed a massive public art project along the riverfront below the Gateway Arch. She and her crew of people drew abstract chalk outlines of Missouri's native wildflowers, such as the hawthorn and coneflower. She then invited passersby to take control and fill in the outlines with birdseed as the medium and the sidewalk as the canvas.

Time lapse video recorded adults and children sprinkling the designs with nearly 1.5 tons of contrasting millet and sunflower seeds to help the city celebrate the transformation of the Arch grounds.

"It becomes a really enjoyable sensory experience for a lot of people," says Witte, who did a similar birdseed project in Belleville, Illinois, last summer. "Kids really enjoy it and don't want to leave. Even adults have talked about how relaxing it is to just have it happen."

While the birdseed art was fun for the public, Witte viewed it as an example of how people affect each other.

"The changes that occur as people walk through, add to, and shift the drawings are a visual metaphor for how others influence our output," she says.

The art also symbolizes a movement in St. Louis to advocate for backyard wildlife habitats and to help fight the loss of pollinators – bees, birds, and butterflies. Local organizations, such as the Missouri Botanical Garden, partnered with Witte to provide hands-on activities to make the public aware of the importance of growing native plants, composting, and other environmental issues.

As part of the movement to give back to nature, the birdseed from the art project was swept up and rebagged for the public to take. Witte also donated 250 pounds of unopened bags of seed to the World Bird Sanctuary in Valley Park, Missouri.

Witte's project was funded by a \$10,000 grant from Critical Mass for the Visual Arts, which selected Witte from three finalists. Witte won over the group with her "Seed the Change" idea, which refers to positive changes happening in the city because of organizations and communities working together.

"The purpose was really to create a beautiful threshold for the city of St. Louis, calling attention to the work that CityArchRiver is already doing to make the city a better place through design," says Witte, a resident of Creve Coeur, Missouri.

CityArchRiver 2015 is the name of the St. Louis project to transform the grounds surrounding the Arch. Biking and running trails, space for outdoor concerts, and a new museum commemorating westward expansion are all part of the plan. The Arch remains open during the renovation of its visitor center and Museum of Westward Expansion, both scheduled to reopen in 2017.

Artist Jessica Witte and her husband, Brad Witte, work on the art project "Seed the Change" with Matt Bird (right) below the Gateway Arch. The theme is about bringing people together to make a positive change in their environment.

For the last decade, Witte has created large-scale drawings on the ground – referred to as "birdseed doilies" – and she tends to include floral and lace elements in her work. The fragile doilies are meant to celebrate labor and maintenance.

Her multimedia art has been featured in more than fifty exhibitions at venues such as the San Diego Art Institute, the Textile Center in Minneapolis, the Museum of Nebraska Art, the Rockford Art Museum, Chicago art galleries, and the Good Citizen Gallery in St. Louis.

Early on in her career, she says, it was painful to watch her temporary art exhibits get destroyed.

"Initially, my work was very much about me and how I laid things out," she says. "It was more of a meditative process for me."

But now she enjoys acting as an orchestrator and watching the crowd create the installation art.

"It became more about seeing what other people could contribute and working with that on the fly to make something bigger than myself," Witte says.

As a graduate student at Northern, she began doing installation and performance art and incorporating food in designs.

"I've used sugar and rice as metaphors for excess and substance," she says. "My work in grad school explored needs versus wants, and food seemed an appropriate material to make others think about the difference."

She remembers professors Christine LoFaso and Billie Giese of the School of Art and Design influencing her work. LoFaso told Witte that the doily work set her apart, and Giese suggested videotaping the process.

NIU helped Witte, who began as a printmaking major, embrace an interdisciplinary approach to art making, Giese says.

"What we emphasize in our program is that you aren't making work for the discipline," says Giese, the drawing area coordinator of the studio division. "When you have an idea, then you go to the best discipline to convey that idea. And you can choose from lots of different disciplines; you aren't just put in a silo."

Witte is now moving on to expand her ideas as an artist and continue making positive changes in St. Louis. She is applying for the highly competitive Artist in Residence Program of Forest Park Forever, which works with the city of St. Louis to restore, maintain, and sustain Forest Park as one of the greatest urban public parks in America.



Editor

Catherine Squires, '80

Associate Editor

Dana Herra, '01

Art Director

Wendy Tritt, B.F.A. '89, M.A. '95

Business Manager

Lee Ann Henry

Contributors

Pat Anderson, M.S. '04

Dana Herra, '01

Bradley Hoey, '84

Angela Johansson, M.A. '05

Colleen Leonard

Paula Meyer

Tom Parisi

Donna Turner

Photographers

Robert Banke

Colleen Leonard

Paula Meyer

Scott Walstrom

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NIU Switchboard: 815-753-1000

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northern letters

Duty Over Graduation Exercise

Your story on Gus Trantham in the summer edition of *Northern Now* brought back memories of my own graduation on June 4, 1966.

On that day, I was the CQ (charge of quarters) for an armor training company at Fort Knox, Kentucky. I had completed my requirements for graduation in August of 1965, but in those days Northern only had graduation in January and June and I was told that I would have to wait until June of 1966 to get my diploma.

Unfortunately, my 2S deferment went away when I did not sign up for classes in September and I was re-classified as 1A. The Vietnam War was in full swing, and the draft board couldn't wait to get their hands on me. By June 4, 1966, I was already in the Army for seven months.

I did not feel sorry for myself that day because I was doing what I considered to be my duty, and that was more important to me than my graduation from Northern. The only thing that bothered me that day was that I had to pay a \$10 cap and gown fee even though I would have had to go AWOL to attend my graduation. Northern mailed my diploma to my parents about a week after the graduation ceremony.

Thank you for doing the right thing for Gus. He deserved the honor you bestowed on him.

– Dick Ephgrave, '66, CBA

First Job Trailblazer

When I graduated from NIU early in January 1973 with a B.S. in honors chemistry and minors in both math and physics, I started looking for a career in chemistry. I was excited searching for my first real job! I learned very soon that not many jobs were open to me in my field. Was it because I was a woman?

I knew I didn't really want to be a pharmaceutical sales rep. I wanted to do the research for drugs to help mankind cure diseases all over the world. The only opening at that time that

I could find meant a trip to Kalamazoo, Michigan, to the Upjohn Co. I also interviewed at Sunstrand (they wanted me to provide computer programming for manufacture of aerospace parts). Then came an unusual interview with Commonwealth Edison (now Exelon). I took that job and moved to Morris, Illinois, and became a radionuclear chemist at the first commercial nuclear power plant: Dresden Nuclear Power Station.

I was the first woman to work inside the nuclear plant, and first professional woman to work inside the nuclear plant, opening doors for many others in the future. I eventually became the first woman to earn a BWR Senior Reactor Operator license (SRO), the first woman to work in the operations department and first woman to become a startup test engineer (this was at the LaSalle Nuclear Station).

– Linda Noreng Shearer, '73

New Favorite Memory

Our new favorite NIU memory is the Hall of Fame game on Oct. 10, 2015. My husband, Bob Gregolunas, '77, was inducted into the Hall of Fame the evening before in a wonderful ceremony attended by many previous Hall of Fame inductees. Our family is truly a "pack" of Huskies – all alumni.

– Pat Gregolunas, '77



From left, Mike Gregolunas, '07, Pat Gregolunas, '77, Bob Gregolunas, '77, Anne Gregolunas Ross, '09, Matt Ross, '08, and Gina Gregolunas, '13.

CORRECTION

The story "Making It Official" in the Summer 2016 edition contained an error. The military service branch of U.S. Marine Captain Michael Guare was misidentified. *Northern Now* regrets the error.

Send your comments for Northern Letters to:

Northern Now, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115 northernnow@niu.edu