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Office of University
Communications

March 3, 2016

Katie Grace Kibler ('11) Applies Art Degree in Her First-Grade Classroom

Kathryn “Katie Grace” Kibler ('11) of Winston-Salem, N.C., was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis six months before she was to enter Gardner-Webb University as a freshman. While she didn't understand all the ways her life was about to change, her admissions counselor worked to get her registered with the Noel Program for students with disabilities, so she could receive necessary accommodations without delay.

“At this point there was no doubt that Gardner-Webb was where the Lord had purposed me to be,” affirmed Kibler, who received a degree in studio art. “Internal struggles with how to manage and cope with the new lifestyle of treatments, medications and physical obstacles became a large part of what developed me as an artist. My senior exhibit displayed artwork that highlighted my disease but not to show people the gruesome and difficult side of things. I wanted my artwork to give people hope that no matter what they may be experiencing the Lord is faithful and provides for our every need.”

The supportive faculty in the Department of Visual Arts helped her navigate the unfamiliar territory.

“The professors worked with me as I began a new journey, in a new place learning new things about myself that were sometimes really tough to get through on my own,” Kibler reminisced. “The art department became my family almost immediately. They challenged me every day in the studio and by doing so they brought out the best of my talents artistically and my character personally. The faculty in that department never once gave up on me, and they never let me give up on myself no matter how hard things seemed to get at times.”

Doug Knotts, professor of art and chair of the Department of Visual Arts, answered questions about art, advised her on class schedules and encouraged her when the disease seemed to get the best of her. “He went out of his way to make sure that I had what I needed for my senior exhibit including helping me stain and put together frames for my artwork,” Kibler noted.

After graduating with her art degree, Kibler prayed about what to do next. In addition to art, she enjoyed working with children as a swimming coach. She also had fond memories of volunteering in a kindergarten class when she was in high school.

“I wanted a way to use my degree, because it held so much value to me,” Kibler disclosed. “My mother has been a teacher for 38 years and after looking at many different graduate school programs and prayerfully seeking the Lord’s guidance, he pointed me in the right direction. I realize looking back that teaching was the perfect way to combine the two things I loved the most: Working with children and creating art!”

She received her Master of Arts in Teaching from Salem College in Winston-Salem, N.C., and is employed as a first grade teacher at a low-income Title I school in the Winston-Salem Forsyth County (N.C.) School System.

“I loved that I was able to find a job where I could incorporate hands-on, engaging art-based activities to help teach my students complex concepts in math, writing, etc.,” she shared. “Seeing how I can use art in my class to scaffold my students’ learning has been a challenge and one of my favorite parts of the job.”

She has also been appointed the Teacher Advisory Council representative for her school. In that role, she meets with other school representatives and the superintendent to discuss important topics and changes in the system and state involving public education. Skills she developed in liberal arts classes at Gardner-Webb help her in this professional role.

“My communication courses prepared me to know what is expected in the real world when it comes to communicating to not only students but to parents, colleagues and administrators as well,” she assessed. “Communication is key in education. With the skills, both verbal and written, that I acquired throughout my time interacting with professors and my peers I became a better communicator when I became a teacher.”

She further developed her writing skills in classes with Dr. Nancy Bottoms, associate professor of art history, who inspired her during the writing process for her senior year thesis.

“It stretched me and helped me to become exceedingly better at writing than I could have hoped to be,” Kibler observed. “This specific skill was a major asset to me throughout my time in graduate school as well as in my career.”

Kibler recommends Gardner-Webb because of the total experience—from the academic program and caring faculty to campus activities, the close-knit community and Christian atmosphere.

“The atmosphere and environment on campus is like being part of one big family,” she observed. “The professors are incredible and without a doubt will know your name and what your interests are—unlike larger universities where students are just a number. There are tons of opportunities to be involved in different activities on campus. Student Activities plans and prepares exciting events, and the people you meet will become friends for a lifetime. The Christian community meant I could come to college with the knowledge that my faith and my beliefs were valued and that the word of God would be shared in the classroom—whether it was in a religious studies course or an art class. It meant I would have the opportunity to grow in my faith and learn more about the Lord and his word.”