

Lyme artist named a Connecticut Arts hero



Suzanne Wind Gaskell (Submitted)



Suzanne Gaskell, "Transformation and Healing"

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One of the nine people chosen as a Connecticut Arts Hero is Suzanne Gaskell of Lyme, a former high school art teacher who blends “her passion for art with her compassion and dedication for advancements in the areas of mental health, addiction, and developmental disabilities.”

Gaskell, who turns 66 this week, is retired from her longtime job in the Daniel Hand High School Art Department in Madison.

She has been a board member for eight years at Gilead Community Services, a nonprofit mental health provider based in Middletown that serves about 1,200 people.

The CT Arts Hero site described Gaskell as “a compassionate and selfless leader in the arts community.”

She was nominated by a group from Gilead and will receive her award in a Jan. 24 ceremony at Infinity Hall in Hartford.

“I’m just so honored,” Gaskell said. “When I initially heard about the award, of course I was overwhelmed. I thought, ‘Oh, my god, how amazing,’ but then what really hit me was how fortunate I was that I worked with some really amazing people who took the time to nominate me for this.”

She said she appreciated, too, that people recognized the value of art and its potential to raise awareness about subjects including mental health and addiction.

Gaskell retired from teaching in June 2022 and said she had a really wonderful 29-year career working in the art department at Daniel Hand High School. She taught a lot of different courses during that time, including AP drawing, printmaking and photography.

“Over the course of my years there, I also started to recognize how important art is to raising people’s awareness and has the potentiality of really shaping policy,” she said.



Suzanne Gaskell, “Subtle Body, Nepal.”

So she worked with her students quite a bit on that, trying to empower them to use their art to express their opinions and thoughts about issues important to them.

“I coupled that with my own experience. I have a son who had an onset of a very serious mental illness about 22 years ago,” she said.

He began receiving services through Gilead Community Services about a decade ago, and he currently lives in a group home there. Gaskell got very connected with Gilead and eventually joined the board.

“That was something I started to feel really passionate about. I was just so inspired by the people who work with a population that can be challenging to work with, but I was also inspired by a lot of the clients who are struggling to manage significant mental illness and sometimes substance abuse issues as well and, in spite of these insurmountable odds, keep plugging along with Gilead and community support. That was an issue that was near and dear to me,” she said.

Gaskell is currently trying to get grant funding for a printmaking collaboration with Gilead clients to create images for the outpatient clinic there, which currently doesn't have any art on the walls. The pieces would welcome people into the space but might also help acquaint them with Gilead's missions, so the images would be about, for instance, inspiring hope and recovery.

Gaskell grew up in Vermont and said she was interested in art “probably as early as I could pick up a crayon. I had just been drawing or painting since I was very, very young.”

She loved dance as well and thought about pursuing theater arts and dance before deciding to focus on the visual arts. She studied at Paier College of Art and earned her undergraduate degree at Albertus Magnus College. She got her master's degree from Wesleyan University and her teaching certification through Southern Connecticut State University.

Gaskell studied design and worked for an architectural firm before she segued into teaching.

Gaskell does mixed-media art, typically working in wood and water-based media.

She also loves geometry, and “I've been very interested in the past in how it is that complex systems of proportion, for example, have worked their ways into great works of art. So there are a lot of geometric underpinnings to a lot of the work that I do.”

Her travels have influenced her art as well. Gaskell said she has been very lucky to have had the opportunity to travel, and the country that really grabbed her heart was Nepal. Her experiences there influenced her own art.

On a related note, she said she has always felt strongly that art education is a way to give children a view into another culture, offering them alternative perspectives and at the same time giving them the chance to see the universality of people's hopes and dreams.

Ultimately, Gaskell said, “I think art is so transformative and connects us to our humanity, so without trying to sound preachy, I would just wish everybody could nurture their creative impulses because I really believe if we allowed ourselves to participate in the richness of artistic experiences, or we use that creativity to raise awareness, shape policy, or imagine solutions, we could make the world a lot better place, and I think art can make that possible.”

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