

# The Art of Teaching

**K**eith Ewing, VU's beloved and off-beat English professor, spent 32 years making a strong impression in the classroom — and in the cafeteria, where he ate lunch with students nearly every day. Though technically retired from teaching, he is still winning hearts and advocating for the arts in his new post as VU's first artist in residence.

As a painter, poet and scholar, Ewing embodied the creative life to hundreds of students who passed through VU.

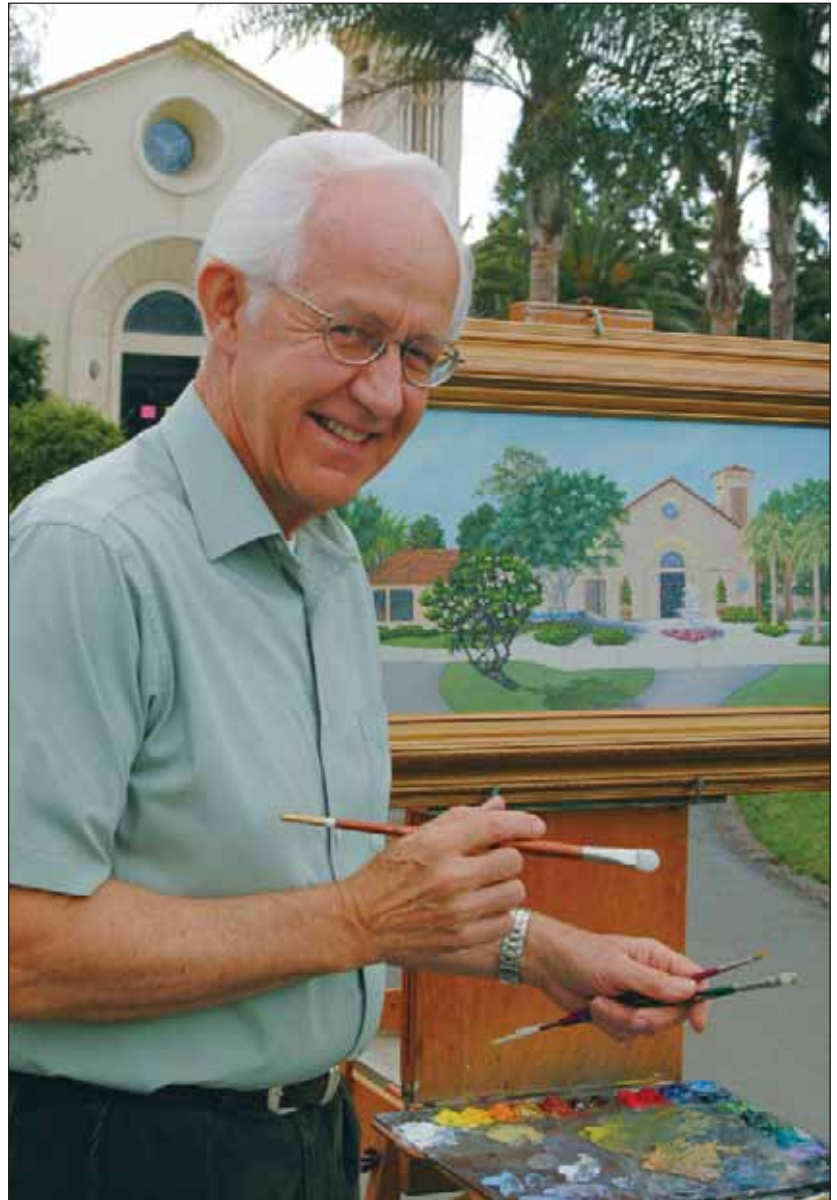
"Keith is a true Renaissance man. He'd laugh if he heard me say that," says alum Chris Carmichael '95 who worked under Ewing for three years as English department secretary. "He ran the English department with humility, taking as many people under his wing as possible. When I was there he mentored 10 or 12 people, some not even in the English department. He devoted himself to his students and his work."

But Ewing's classes weren't all fun and games. He managed to be simultaneously lighthearted and exacting, taking what he calls a "very hard stance on developing your gift."

"I have for a good many years taught that the person who's gifted with a particular creativity cannot be fulfilled any other way but by developing that gift, which is hard, pioneer work," Ewing says. "You've got to find your way to express yourself and it has to be original or it has no value. I take the scripture seriously which teaches that our fulfillment in Christ is to do God's will, and those of us who are [artistically] gifted must fulfill those gifts or we're like the man who hid his talent in the dirt and said his master was too cold and hard."

Ewing's own "pioneer work" — in the form of original acrylic, oil and watercolor paintings — is on display around campus.

Ewing came of age on a farm in the gorgeous Columbia River gorge, the only place in the world where a river cuts through a mountain range at a right angle. His father, a building contractor in a small Washington town, had no pressing financial need for the farm but kept it anyway — with milk



cows, a garden, pigs and 600 chickens — to keep Keith and his brother out of town and out of trouble. "He pretty much succeeded," Keith says. When the boys left home, their parents sold everything but the dogs.

Ewing thought he'd be an architect.

"I'd be with my father at an unfinished building and the architects would drive up, talk to him and drive off. I asked him why the architects did none of the work and made all the money," he says.

*Keith Ewing, continued on page 6*

That ambition died at 17 when Ewing had a “serious religious experience” and began attending the Pentecostal church instead of his parents’ Methodist church. That led him to enroll in Bible school where he found that most students were preparing for pulpit or missionary work.

“That wasn’t my calling,” he says. “I decided at the end of my third year that I would teach, and English was the only thing available at a Christian liberal arts college at the time.”

He loved literature and the “wonderful intellectual puzzle” called grammar. He graduated at the top of his class from Eugene Bible College in Oregon in 1955, then finished his English degree at Cascade College in 1958 with a minor in education. He taught at EBC and was named dean at age 26. There he married a former student, Myrtle, who had come from South Dakota with her older brother. The newlywed Ewings transferred to Des Moines, and Keith studied at Drake University and was dean of students at EBC’s sister school. They returned to Oregon where he became dean of Cascade College, and in 1969 they moved to Santa Barbara so Keith could teach at Westmont College. In 1971 he came to VU.

All the while, he was developing as an artist, teacher and administrator.

“I was always painting, drawing, writing and playing the piano,” he says. “Teaching takes a lot of time and energy, but I never ignored these other gifts. They were part and parcel of who I am.”

He filled file cabinets with short stories, plays and poetry. When he and Myrt bought a house in Newport Beach years ago, they made sure it had a large bedroom they could turn into a permanent art studio. And Ewing still “pounds the piano for my own amusement and amazement,” he says. “You come home dead tired from work and sit at the piano and in half an hour you change your whole attitude toward life.”

At Vanguard he embarked on a teaching career that won him friends and admirers among his students. He developed a habit of eating lunch in the cafeteria and inviting himself to sit with students.



*A willingness to meet students on their level has won Ewing many friends among current students and alums. “It’s great fun, and you’re always in touch with who they are, where they’re coming from,” he says.*

“I hate to pack a lunch, so I’ve got to eat somewhere,” he says half-seriously. “It’s natural to be where the students are. Plus you get into such wonderful conversations. They’re so free to express themselves. Once they discover that you’re interested in them and their ideas, they’ll share them with you. At first they’re nervous that a faculty member showed up, but if you meet them on their territory and not claim superiority, it isn’t long until they’re talking openly. It’s great fun, and you’re always in touch with who they are, where they’re coming from, what they think of current music, theater, automobiles, ’cause once you know what’s in their mind you can teach what’s relevant to them.”

One of his colleagues told him, “The reason you have that entourage is you’re such a bohemian and they want to be with someone who’s free-swinging and creative.” Ewing laughs at the idea. “Maybe I’m

being commended for who I am, and it’s a puzzle for other people, but not for me.”

Ewing was VU’s registrar for nine years, and taught advanced English grammar, creative writing, the theory of the creative life and the history and theory of literary criticism. Now that he’s retired, he’s cleaning out file cabinets and re-reading hundreds of notes and cards from students.

“I appreciate most when they say, ‘You taught me how to think,’” he says. “There is such thing as an independent mind and being your own critic. ... That’s exciting to me, to point to students whom I spent a lot of time with and say, ‘That pays off.’”

John Gregg ’82 came to Vanguard in 1978 from Ohio and took several of Ewing’s classes. Today he is pastor of Christian

Center in Kalispell, Mont., a church of around 2,500.

“Keith always had a gang of students around him, and this sense of fun and energy,” Gregg says. “He helped build a sense of community in my life. Keith has a great shepherd’s heart and discipling heart. He’s a real mentor, a compassionate father figure. All the profs were that way, but he’s willing to help students beyond the classroom untangle life’s knots. When you’re 18, you’re dumb as mud, away from home for the first time trying to figure out which way is up. Keith was a kind presence. And he taught me how to ski.”

Keith Ewing, continued from page 6


Students made Ewing the senior baccalaureate speaker in 2003 and dedicated the yearbook to him. His legacy also includes thirty years as a Sunday school teacher. He and Myrt started a singles ministry at Newport Mesa Christian Center in 1973, then an adult Bible discussion class which has formed the core of their social world.

Today, as VU's artist in residence, he's performing research that may someday lead to an art major.

"Evangelicals have been frightened of theater, film, dance, painting and sculpting," he says. "Many have considered them not only a waste of time and energy but an indulgence in the flesh. People who don't have a gift for these things are pretty certain that if you're expressing yourself emotionally through the arts, you're permitting yourself to express things that are not healthy for you spiritually, mentally, emotionally."

That opinion is changing, he says, and these days the school gets many calls about its art major.

"The answer is, we don't have one," he says. "But lack of money doesn't keep us from researching or dreaming. Young people coming out of our own churches are in tune with the idea that you can be an art major, film maker, study dance, a theater major. The kids are ahead of us. VU already has strong theater and music programs. Part of my reason for hanging around is to see if I can push the art thing before I get too old."

If the university one day offers an art major, Ewing will have left another imprint on the institution and its students — even those who didn't get to have lunch with him. 

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