Let's pause to celebrate the arts programs at BC

Last June, I went to Italy with one main objective — to watch our Bakersfield College choir perform on a tour that went from the Vatican in Rome, to Florence, and then Venice. Travel complications delayed the start of my trip, so even though I landed in Rome, I did not catch up with the tour until a couple of days later, in a beautiful Franciscan church in Florence.

What a gift it was for me to spend time with the students and faculty members! I joined them for dinner before the concert at a small restaurant where their conversation and laughter filled the air. After dinner, we walked together to the church and I watched them warming up for their performance by singing together and generally enjoying their time together.

Soon, beautiful voices resounded through an ancient church, the sound spilling out into the street and filling the seats as those outside heard the joyful refrains and were drawn to the inside.

It is in experiencing the arts — the dedication and commitment behind the making, performing, showing, and sharing of the arts — through which we are reminded how fundamentally the arts can transform lives. It certainly was transforming for me to spend time with these students. Each of the students spoke with passion about their learning, and spoke with affection and deep gratitude about working under the leadership of their director, Dr. Jen Garrett.

This extraordinary commitment of our faculty to the arts, theater, music and visual arts is a long-standing tradition of our century-old college. BC’s theater arts tradition dates back to when Grace Bird was Dean of Kern County Junior College. Bird was close friends with Kern County Union High School’s Ethel Robinson, “Miss Robbie,” BC’s first Director of Theatre. In the 1980s, Professor Randy Messick found the Kern Shakespeare Festival (performing “Henry IV Part I,” under the stars, through Saturday).

Bakersfield College’s connection to the visual arts brought annual exhibitions, visiting artists, and guest lectures hosted by Ruth Emerson in the ’20s. In 1967, Italian muralist Ulrico Schettini lectured on “Aspects of Rome through the Ages” while serving as BC’s artist in residence. In 2003, as part of the BC Eminent Speakers Series presentations, Enrique Chagoya, a well-known Stanford University artist, spoke on the intricacies of print-making and the general state of Chicano Studies and Art.

In 2011, BC honored Professor Emeritus Clayton Rippey, creator of the beloved Renegade Knight mosaic on the corner of Haley and Panorama, as his mosaic was cleaned and repaired, using more than 100 new tiles. And in August 2013, the Bakersfield College Centennial exhibit featured artwork in a variety of media by retired faculty Al Davis, Al Naso, Chalita Brossett Robinson, Harry Wilson, and Marlene Tatsuno.

Currently, the Art Gallery is showing our 2015 Art Faculty exhibit featuring Tom Betthauser, Andrew Borrego, Cameron Brian, Jamie Eaton, Darrin Ekern, Diego Gutierrez, Gina Herrera, David Koeth, Christopher Lessley, Mike Richards, Nano Rubio, Adel Shafik, Kristopher Stallworth, Dacey Villarreal and Penelope Young.

And music, so much beautiful music. In 1961, BC’s marching band, under the direction of Dr. Ken Fehsbeider, won Band Competition in Pasadena and was invited to perform at the 1962 World’s Fair in Seattle. In 1965, the Bakersfield College Choir and their esteemed director Joseph Hursztin won first prize at the International Musical Eisteddfod at Llangollen, Wales — an astonishing achievement recognized by President Lyndon Johnson at a special White House press conference, and by a private audience at the papal residence at Castel Gandolfo.

Just recently, the college welcomed the community to the grand reopening of the renovated Edward Simonsen Performing Arts Center. Dr. Ron Kean conducted the Bakersfield Symphony Orchestra through musical favorites, culminating with the debut of the striking Joyful Noise, a commissioned piece by BC music professor John Gerhold. Recently, the BC music program expanded its Kinesthetic Music Program with a Drum & Bugle Corps directed by Tim Heasley.

Last June, in Florence, Italy, I was immersed in what the arts bring to BC, and to our community. These students had a once-in-a-lifetime experience in Rome, Florence and Venice, traveling together with friends for life. These students will not only form the fabric of our community as they live, and work, and pay taxes, but they too will commit their time and energy, and their amazing skills to making this community richer for us all, for generations to come.

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