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Local artist honored for his contributions to art center's development, realization

Karen Gardner News-Post Staff Oct 24, 2001



Meredith Springer is photographed amidst artwork by the recent winners in the competition that bears his name. Mr. Springer was one of the early proponents of the Delaplaine Visual Arts Education Center and the center has shown its gratitude by naming an annual award for him. The center opened in temporary quarters in 1986 and in its permanent home in 1993.

Bill Green

Meredith Springer envisioned an art center with exhibit space, classes and outreach efforts back in 1976.

Today that center exists in the form of the Delaplaine Visual Arts Education Center with ongoing exhibits, classes for children and adults, a full-time staff and a library. The center honors Mr. Springer's contribution with an annual award, the Meredith Springer III Award of Special Merit.

The first three winners are Karin Birch for fiber, Andrea Burchette for drawing and Margaret Dowell for oils. Their work will be on display until Oct. 28. A gallery talk with the artists will be on Thursday, Oct. 25, at 7:30 p.m. at the center, located at 40 S. Carroll St. in Frederick.

Work that will never be seen at the gallery, however, is Mr. Springer's. "I intentionally do not show my work there," he said. "I don't want anyone to think I did this for personal gain. I'm just thankful it succeeded."

As a child he attended free art classes given to selected students at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. He wanted youngsters in Frederick to have that same opportunity.

He described himself as shy in high school and college. "One of my professors told me I had leadership abilities," he said. "People here today see me as outspoken, but back then it was more rising to the occasion, filling a need, not a need of my own but a community need."

In 1982 Mr. Springer formed a committee within the Frederick Arts Council to explore the possibility of an arts center. He and his wife, Mamie, had been living in Frederick for six years. He came here to teach art after earning his bachelor's and master's degrees in art. He and his wife met as undergraduates at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. "Indiana is a town very similar to Frederick, with a much larger college," he said. He initially thought an arts center would be an asset to that Western Pennsylvania community.

When he arrived in Frederick he thought about his dream. During the flood of 1976 he saw the old Mountain City Mill building surrounded by water. That building would later become the arts center. Over the next few years he developed his teaching career and his painting career.

As a member of the arts council Mr. Springer set up a committee that would oversee formation of the arts center. At that time there was no building and no money for one. There was barely money for supplies. To raise a little money, he and Harry Richardson and the late Barry Richardson each donated a painting to be raffled.

The paintings were raffled at the Koi Festival at Lilypons, which also sponsored the art association's first juried art show. The committee parlayed \$300 in seed money it had raised from dues and show fees into \$3,000. Enthusiasm was beginning to build in the art community. Charles Thomas, of Lilypons, was an early supporter of Mr. Springer's.

At about the same time the Maryland Arts Council offered grants to counties that wanted to start arts centers. "The money came to Frederick but it went to the Weinberg (Center for the Arts). Mr. Springer said the

committee's goal was not to compete with the Weinberg, which focuses on the performing arts.

"Instead of sharing the same pie, we were trying to grow the pie," he said.

In 1986 the committee was able to incorporate the Frederick Arts Center Foundation. "It just flowed," he said. Up until the arts center concept began, Mr. Springer's own art career was going pretty well. He had exhibited in Paris in 1976 in a Bicentennial exhibit known as "American Painters in Paris." He had some work on display in Annapolis. His paintings were selling well.

He put his career on hold, however, to work on the arts center. "(Former Frederick Mayor) Ron Young had a vision of a museum," Mr. Springer said. "There was no large exhibition space in Frederick."

Mr. Springer cut back on his painting career to devote more time to the arts center. In the meantime, he was teaching elementary school art. "Teaching art by itself was a full-time job," he said. On top of that was the arts center challenge. "I was tired a lot of the time."

He kept a data base of local artists and kept them informed of the progress. In 1986, the center opened in temporary quarters on West Patrick Street. In 1987, the Delaplaine and Randall families of Frederick gave the former mill building to the city to be used as the arts center. Charles Crum was the first executive director. "The first thing we bought was a computer," Mr. Springer said.

That came in handy when the committee undertook an \$800,000 capital campaign to renovate the building. The committee turned to Dan Sullivan, a local architect, to design the renovation. Floors and a new roof needed to be installed, and the cavernous brick building needed to be stabilized. In 1993, a few years after the building was given to the city, the center opened.

"I had the time and some insights about how artists think," he said. "I'm really proud of the fact that it's grown far beyond where it was when I left it."

Clem Gardiner, another arts center volunteer, said Mr. Springer's contribution was vital to the center. "He was the spark that lit the fire," Mr. Gardiner said. "It went from meeting in his dining room to what it is

now. If an obstacle came up he went around it and over it. He didn't get discouraged."

Noralie Katsu, past president of the Frederick County Art Association, said, "He was the person most singly responsible for bringing it to life. He dedicated a number of years of his time to bringing it to us." She became president of the Art Association after Mr. Springer. "He was a tough act to follow."

Mr. Springer still has ideas for the future growth of the arts. "I have an idea to start a committee that would serve the same function as the Olympic committee does for athletes," he said. "One of the missions of the Olympic committee is to promote peace and understanding. Art can serve that same purpose."