

Streaming Color Wheels

by Nita K. Ritzke

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Whether interacting with young people or adults, visual artist and educator Nicole Gagner encourages people to escape themselves. Escape personal limitations; escape self-criticism; escape the fear of trying something new.

“Anybody can be creative. Learning is more important than the finished product.”

After completing 30 paintings in 30 days, Gagner is familiar with the pressure to be creative amid constrictions. When Covid-19 challenged live collaboration, her creativity kicked into high gear. Since her scheduled art classes and activities were indefinitely postponed or cancelled, she transitioned to using digital formats.

As an Artist in Residence for the North Dakota Council on the Arts, she usually goes into schools for a week for hands-on, immersive lessons. Within the schools, she aims to meet with every student. The week concludes with a cumulative art show. When schools closed in March, Gagnon needed to switch palettes.

After discussion with Lewis and Clark Elementary in Mandan, she adapted her methods for interaction without losing the objective content and personal encouragement. With the help of the school, students were able to safely pick up art kits and, using YouTube Live, she engaged 75 fifth-grade students. She provided lessons in drawing designs and constructing three-dimensional cities. The sessions were taped so if students were not able to connect to the live, interactive sessions, they could access the lesson later. Rather than a culminating, in-person art show, photos of the works will be shared through a slide show. Finished examples are posted on the school’s PTO Facebook [page](#).

Lewis and Clark teacher Bonnie Riopelle says having a professional artist in the class is valuable because students can ask questions as they are creating. “Her rapport and explanations make the students feel important. She gives them the freedom to be creative and [encourages them] to go beyond their own little box.”

Like much of life this spring, things would have been better in person. Nicole wishes she could have seen the work of the students while in process and engaged with them more personally, but all involved agree the compressed interaction was better than none.

Throughout April, Nicole Gagner also created new instructional videos for community enrichment. She linked them to her [blog](#) and posted them on YouTube. Each video provides an overview of materials and techniques. Her encouraging, humble demeanor coached viewers in creating a sketchbook from a single piece of paper, abstract collage, painting a watercolor night sky and using unconventional materials for paints (like coffee and spices). As of late-May, her videos have been viewed nearly 1000 times.

Nicole Gagner's summer looks to be as active as her spring —online and off. Originally, she was slated to lead the community in painting an outdoor mural in downtown Bismarck. She is crowd sourcing the [design](#) of mural so even if the public no longer has a hand in the painting due to social distancing, they can still give input on the project. She is also continuing online art workshops.

“I wouldn't have it any other way. The busier, the better.”