

Alumni Spotlight

Featuring Stephanie Oplinger



Stephanie Oplinger, 34, of Hunker, PA, has made a splash in the art world. An alumna of Westmoreland County Community College, she will be a featured artist at the Science Innovation Center's Art Gallery from November 6th to December 1st, with a reception on November 13th from 1:30-3:30pm.

When you graduate high school, you are faced with so many options on what to do next. Stephanie decided to attend college. "I lived close to the college, and my mother received her nursing degree from this college also. As I had no family who had ever attended college beyond a two-year degree, I had no understanding of any other options. I'm happy to say it worked out in my favor as WCCC is dedicated to not just teaching but in also helping students understand how to continue forward into a career."

Stephanie first attended Westmoreland from 2007-2009 and studied legal assisting. Furthering her education from 2019-2020, she chose to study fine arts, which has always been her dream major.

"When I enrolled a second time in 2019, I was studying to enter the medical field, still persuaded in the mindset that I need to get a 'real job.' I took a single art class and met Kathy Dlugos [Associate Professor of Art] during an event. She convinced me that art is a legitimate career and that I was making a huge mistake for not pursuing my passion. Eventually I listened, and I shudder to think where I would be now - in yet another job that would make me unhappy - if I had not met her and listened. Kathy has been a mentor ever since, and I am thankful for her guidance."

When we think back to our college years, we often have a memory that stick out more than others. Stephanie says that she didn't have a specific memory, but an accumulation of them. "I don't have any specific memory, but an accumulation of them gave me the feeling of, 'Is this really happening? I get to show up and study and do this amazing thing? And all these people in this classroom are into the same thing and I get to talk to them about it too?' I spent more than a decade trying jobs in different industries that left me feeling small, miserable, out of step, and always questioning everything. My classes in the art studios at WCCC, taught by Kathy Dlugos, Chris Kocevar, and Michael McDevitt, was the first time in my adult life that I felt excited about life again. That's a feeling that hasn't gone away since."

After attending college, she completed her BFA in Fine Arts at PennWest CalU in 2022. She is also continuing creative entrepreneurship training through the Creative Business Accelerator, which is a connection she made during her time studying here at WCCC.

Currently, she operates her own arts studio in Greensburg and manages a web store through her online site at www.stephanieoplingerarts.com. She is also the Office & Gallery Coordinator at Touchstone Center for Crafts, responsible for the gallery retail store, receptionist area, registration, and assisting in the gallery.

So how did college prepare Stephanie for her current career? "I experienced the arts program at WCCC as extremely dedicated to helping students understand how to have a career or a business in the arts. I attended the art symposiums at WCCC, where businesses and networks gave presentations on creative entrepreneurship. Visiting Artists came to our classes and spoke about their career trajectories and gave critiques and feedback of our work. Art business classes are readily available at WCCC alongside the studio classes, one of which was in conjunction with the Creative Business Accelerator, and I am still doing programming with the CBA that continually helps me to take my business to the next level. For example, with the CBA's help, this year will be my first year vending at Handmade Arcade in Pittsburgh. None of this would have happened without that first connection that WCCC and Kathy Dlugos helped me make."

Stephanie stays involved in the community and professional networks. "The Greensburg Art Center has been a big resource and community connection for me. I teach children's classes there and was on the gallery committee for their recent pottery exhibition, From the Earth. Community is so important and I love the community that is present there. I am currently serving as the Vice President and web master for the Pittsburgh Print Group, a collective of printmakers from the tri-state area. As the group is picking up momentum again after Covid, it is great to be connecting with other printmakers from the region."

Although she describes herself as a workaholic between her full-time job at Touchstone and working on her art business and creating new artwork, she enjoys her spare time hanging out with friends, rock climbing, reading, kayaking, and sewing. She is also completely obsessed with film, and she and her brother, Samuel, make indie films together as the Oplinger Siblings.

Closing thoughts to our current college students? "Take advantage of every opportunity that comes up. WCCC has provided me with more opportunities to get my art career started than anywhere else that I have studied. Having now had some experience on the administration side of things, it's really amazing how many opportunities artists just don't show up for when it was theirs for the taking. Just show up! And keep showing up! It will make a difference and create a momentum over time. I still have to remind myself to keep showing up when I'm discouraged too. But it makes a difference. Keep showing up!"