Pacific Portraits: The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University (Volume One)

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Cover and interior design by Emily Coats
Interior layout by Pacific University Students

Published by Pacific University Libraries 2015

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ISBN-13 978-0-9884827-6-0

Pacific University Libraries
2043 College Way
Forest Grove, Oregon 97116

www.pacificu.edu/libraries

Published in the United States of America

Bee Tree Books
An imprint of the Pacific University Libraries

Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature […]

honey gatherers of the mind.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The “Bee Tree”, an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was “said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children.”
Even if she had not said it, it is easy to tell that Joyce Gabriel is an artist by the articulate movements of her fingers and impeccably well-coordinated, spunky outfits. Sometimes her right index finger and thumb come together as if holding an imaginary brush or pen, illustrating her words. As she sits upright, legs crossed, her purple tights add a pop of color to her muted, brown dress. “I’ve been here since 2000.” In that year, there were only three people working in the department. By the year 2008, there were ten.

Joyce Gabriel is Pacific University’s Creative Director of Marketing and Communications. Her digital designs have made it onto the covers of Pacific magazine. She works to enhance the visibility of the university, as well as oversee the “look and feel” of all of Pacific’s branding. The department provides templates, “a whole slew of templates” that faculty, staff, and students can use for brochures, newsletters, flyers, and/or Powerpoints.

Joyce grew up in South Dakota and graduated with a degree in Art and Home Economic Education. However, “I decided I wanted to do something a little different than teaching. I wanted to be the one who does things, produces things.” After trying interior design, working at a fabric store, and then a small ad agency, “I realized I wanted to work in graphic design.” Security Pacific Bank was a client of the small agency in Portland, “they liked my work so much that they hired me to be the bank’s full time graphic designer.” Following the ad agency, Joyce was employed at a few other places before she saw the opportu-
nity to work at Pacific. “I thought it sounded like a good fit.”

A typical day for Joyce actually begins the night before. She takes time to organize and develop her plan for the following day. When she gets to work, she checks her email and calendar. She completes miscellaneous tasks, attends a meeting or two, and becomes aware of any upcoming deadlines. Her glasses, though they appear ordinary enough at first glance, have a subtle crackled look on closer examination; chic statements framing lively blue eyes. “I think what is rewarding about this job is that it is always changing. Things happen in cycles through the year and the longer you work here, the more you understand the cycle.” In addition, “The students become colleagues and they change things up quite a bit.”

When conversing with Joyce, we notice how her hands sit patiently over her knees, becoming animated when asked to explain her art or the process of using a letterpress. Sometimes, they simply attend to the paisley shawl gently draped over her body. Looking around the office, you’ll see an array of art pieces that surround her workspace. Above her desk hangs a mobile that holds artist trading cards—like little fairy-sized pictures. As she begins to introduce her artwork and graphics, it is easy to realize where her profession and passion intersect.

One week later we are in Joyce’s home. My name is Joyce. I am 8 years old…My favorite subject is Art, declares a handwritten sign displayed in her first-floor art studio, which is filled with original illustrations; small, whimsical watercolors with predominant palettes of blue and green.

“Art runs in the family,” she says, selecting two pieces from a bookshelf. “I was surrounded by it, whether it was mom cooking, dad woodworking, or my grandmothers stitching and sewing.” Now Joyce and her husband, Tim, who forges finely wrought metal creations out back, continue the legacy. Each year they host an open house for others to enjoy their work. “Art for me is connecting with people,” says Joyce with an easy smile as she shows us a close up of a pink flower and a self-portrait in oil paint. “I don’t want fame and fortune. I want to inspire someone to pick up a brush—to know they can, whether they’re ‘the best’ or not.”

For a challenge, Joyce does “inktober,” posting one illustration per day on Instagram (@gabrielglimpse) for the month of October. One year she completed fifty-two illustrations and made a deck of cards. Amidst the eclectic variety of subjects—from snails to pencils—are quite a few pears.

“When I don’t know what to paint, I go back to pears,” she explains, browsing a sketchbook. “They center me. I think every artist needs something like that.” She opens to a page full of salt and pepper shakers. “This series is a travel diary. I’m not good at jour-
naling, so this was a way to keep track of where I’d been.”

Recently, Joyce added letter-pressing to her repertoire. “Don’t let Scary Larry the monster get you!” calls Tim as we descend into her second studio in the basement. She laughs and flits around, turning on bare bulbs. With a left turn, we’ve entered “Studio 57.” Sky-blue walls separate it from the rest of the gray basement. Some newer pieces, combining old type and Joyce’s illustrations, dangle from exposed pipes, creating an art-meets-industrial vibe.

“My favorite font, Helvetica, was made in 1957,” explains Joyce, donning a lime-green apron. “I was born in 1957, and got this press, which Tim repaired, when I was 57. The name just fit.”

Joyce works the machinery, her right hand deftly spinning the ink plate, while her left hand pushes down the lever, pressing the cards. The clanking of the gears becomes music in the studio. Each card says Just Write beneath a blue typewriter. A previous run carries the message, Slow down. Capture the moment.

When we ask about this phrase, Joyce claps her hands and turns her eyes upward. “When I was a kid, I’d say to my mom ‘I wish it were Saturday.’ She’d tell me, ‘Don’t wish your life away—enjoy where you are today.’ My advice is enjoy simple pleasures; enjoy the process. Don’t compare yourself to others. Your passion will pull you through.”