

Stories of Generosity from the Common Ground Community

Interview by Pat Boland

Mina Leierwood describes the volunteer work she does as varying in both scope and scale. One small thing she does is pick up a friend that's blind on her way to Common Ground – a Dana she says “gives back immediately” because it keeps her on a regular schedule.

Mina works as an art teacher in the public schools, teaching art in grades Kindergarten through five. She also spends a great deal of her free time involved in community-based art projects. To her the Dana exists equally in the paid and volunteer work.

Going Outside the Boundaries

Mina views her work as an art teacher as going outside of the boundaries of an ordinary school day.

“It’s because I want my students to see there is a community that cares about them, that they can participate in, and have a conversation with.”

She looks at her artistic life as being very much about Dana, and building community, and also exploring how far the imagination can go. “I’m being paid to work at school, but I still look at it as a Dana situation where I’m always giving in, and the students are always giving back. I really get a lot out of working with young people.”

Indeed, Mina’s art projects stretch the imagination, and go outside the boundaries of usual school projects. They incorporate teachings about all types of art, Minnesota history, climate change, recycling, fossil fuels, and more.

Scarecrow Project

“Senora Mina, you are wildly creative” was one student’s response to the scarecrow project.

Mina challenged her students to work in small groups to build a scarecrow out of recycled materials, and submit them to the “very obscure” state fair scarecrow contest in the crop art section of the state fair.

In the Heart of the Beast MayDay Parade



The students created fifteen scarecrows, and the entire school community voted to choose the scarecrows that would travel to the fair.

“We did not stuff our scarecrows with hay; we stuffed them with plastic, so it was about making art with found objects, and recycling, than about making traditional scarecrows. Most of these kids have never done any agriculture, nor have any need for a scarecrow. It’s much more about folk art, Minnesota history, farming, and agricultural history.”

The scarecrow project is just one example of what Mina does through her job as an art teacher. “We explore new areas I’ve never explored before. That gives my students a chance to shine and me a chance to work on a project I’ve never tried before.”

Mina has been deeply involved in community art since childhood. For many years she and her husband have worked with In the Heart of the Beast Puppet Theatre.

“We have been involved with Heart of the Beast since the beginning of our getting together; we’ve raised both our children blocks from the theatre. The MayDay parade is a huge Dana experience because it’s a free gift to the community. I love that there is a place for children in this world where the sky is the limit, and no holds barred on their imagination. For me that’s a huge gift, and if I can give that as well, that is my professional life.”

Community Art – Art as Conversation

Mina has been involved in projects ranging from art cars, to art bikes and art ice shanties – all projects that involve having a conversation with the community that can be serious, and simply fun, and joyous.

“Community art is my passion. I like outsider art that’s on the fringes or in the streets. For me the idea is of putting your art, not in a gallery, but out on the street where you can interact with people. I’m making people laugh and smile. That is the Dana of that. Because I’ve been putting myself visually out there for so long, it’s a habit. I interact with people on the street all the time.”

Mina says she is grateful to know about Dana, and this idea that you give what you can, and other people give what they can. She feels the art work she does – all work that connects her to many parts of differing communities – is a work of the heart.

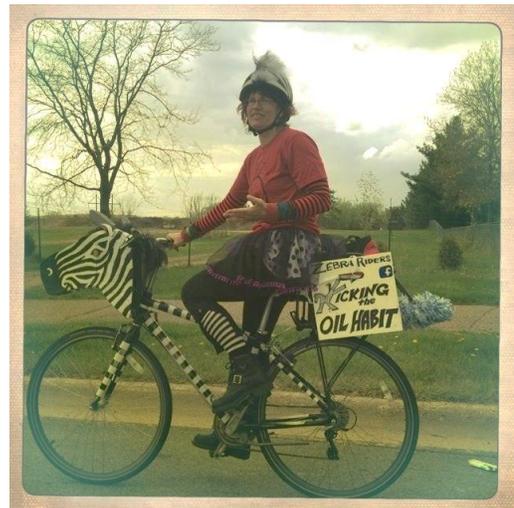
“Part of Dana is giving, and part of it is receiving too, so it is important that it feels like you are in conversation with the world. You’re showing up and participating, and you don’t know what’s coming your way; you’re giving with an open heart and hoping you will get some positive response, but you don’t know, so it’s a risk.”



Dicehouses – stocked with playing cards, dice, and games – encourage people to enjoy the warmth of spending time playing together.

The church like shanty behind the dicehouses is the “Confession Shanty.” Visitors were invited inside to write their secret and post it, with the instruction, “If you must put a name, first name only...”

Kickin' the oil habit to celebrate Earth Day



Xena and Ethan

Xena and Ethan, close friends of Mina and her husband, and part of the artistic community they live in, were in a terrible car accident three years ago. They were hit by a drunk driver going 60 miles an hour, and Ethan was killed. Mina described how Ethan’s death deeply affected her view of life, and her perspective on Dana, and on contributing freely to others.

“It was so terrible and so random that it shook me to my very roots. I realized you could be gone tomorrow for no good reason. That’s how life is. Random causes and conditions lead to things happening, and there is no way to stop or prevent them from happening. Tomorrow I might be like Ethan. I might be gone. So you have to do your work now; have your joy now, because you don’t know.”

“I used to think my life is so good because I do all this good stuff. I don’t think that anymore. I think you do all this good stuff and hope that things will be good. You know that good is out there, and the world is a better place for it, but you don’t necessarily get to collect.

You can’t be attached, because it’s all passing. So, we savor what we’ve got.”