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Let's talk shop

Women of ACBA discuss craftsmanship, community and gender stereotypes

By **Samantha Connors**

The stone and plaster workshop at the American College of the Building Arts (ACBA) is nothing less than awe-inspiring. A handful of students chisel away at massive blocks of stone seated in front of them. They are intensely focused on the precise movements that transform their rough, blank blocks into pieces of art.

Stark white, ornately carved columns crafted by first-year students stand along the walls, a testament to the skills of even the newest additions to the school. Elaborately carved sculptures of the human form adorn the shelves and the nearly lost art of delicate, decorative plaster is, well, plastered throughout the room.

Each workshop for the six major courses of study at ACBA shines in its own right, with projects scattered throughout and dedicated students honing their crafts even outside regular class hours. Among the trades that students study are architectural carpentry, blacksmithing, classical architecture and design, plaster, architectural stone and timber framing. The ACBA, accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Careers and Colleges, offers a two-year associate's degree program in four majors and a four-year bachelor's degree program in all six.

Stereotypes of tradesmen skew toward burly tattooed men, but look around ACBA, and you're greeted by students of all ages, backgrounds and genders working side-by-side.

"The people here are really supportive," said Grace Malcolm, a 20-year-old junior from Virginia who is studying classical architecture and design.

"It's cool — the women, there may be few of us, but we're pretty close. Everyone knows who everyone is at the very least. ... There are definitely more guys here than girls. As a result, a lot of my friends are guys, and they're great, really supportive. It's really just a good community."

Though only about a quarter of the student body is women, the school's president Army Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Colby M. Broadwater III said during a Nov. 9 tour of the school that about half the valedictorians have been female students, demonstrating how ACBA supports students typically left out or discouraged from attending trade school.

"Gender stereotypes aren't rules, and there's no good reason for anybody or any gender not to do what they love," said Christina Butler, professor of historic preser-

vation and chair of general education.

"I think it's always still challenging to do something different, but it's the best time to do it. I mean, if not now, when?"

A unique curriculum

ACBA is the only college in the United States that combines a liberal arts education with professional training in traditional building trades.

"There's no other program where you can get this much focused trade experience for a traditional trade and partner that with a normal liberal arts college education, so you still graduate with a college degree," Butler said.

"I like teaching at a place where you're combining two different kinds of education that have been historically divorced for no good reason. ... I feel like students leaving here have a lot of different career paths because of the kind of education we've created."

Though the curriculum spans traditional subjects such as world history, Butler said the general education classes are tailored towards the built environment. Her architectural history class, for example, is like "world history taught through architecture," she explained.

Angela Caban, professor of decorative arts and faux finishes, added, "The craftsmen have [traditionally] been kept separate from the academics, and I think that's really wrong because craftspeople need to have the history behind it. And I think the people who are writing about it need to know the process."

"That's why this place is different. It's not your normal 'trade school,' right? We're trying to also teach them languages and literature and art history and design and architecture. We're bringing it all together."

This was a major factor that drew Malcolm to the school — she felt it incorporated her love of working with her hands and studying classical art and literature.

"They have a big focus on making sure every project you do is heavily researched ... it's really extensive," she said, "but you're also learning those hands-on skills of rendering and drafting."

"I'm here to inspire," Caban said. "I might

not make you the best fresco artist or gilder in this limited time I have you, but I will expose you to the poopoo platter, right? So that you can find out ... whatever it is that makes your heart sing and focus on that."

Going pro

ACBA students have a lot of opportunities to experience the professional world before graduation. Every student is required to complete an externship with a professional company in their discipline each summer.

This may sound like unwanted summer-time homework to some outsiders, but the externship is one of the students' most treasured parts of their education.

"I love the externship," said 27-year-old junior Linnea Carlson, a Texas native who is studying architectural carpentry. "Not only do you get actual experience, you also get to see what you do and don't like."

Carlson has completed two externships thus far — one working for a small historic preservation business in Virginia and another working with the architects of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

"After my first externship, because I got to work one-on-one with the business owner, I got much more comfortable with power tools. I got a healthy, safe confidence around these machines that I didn't have before," Carlson said.

"When I left that externship, I did feel empowered because I had learned so much. The next semester, I'd have guys in the shop be like, 'Hey, how do I do this with the saw, like the panel saw? How do I set it up?' and I'm like, 'Yeah, I can show you how to do that.'"

"It's not just the professors here. I've learned so much from the other students who have come in with experience already. They definitely don't make you feel less than for the fact that you're here to learn."

Students throughout all majors gain valuable work experience in cities across the world.

"What [ACBA] has done in growing these externships and cultivating and working with people, it's amazing," said Joy Watson, a 60-year-old second-year decorative plaster student.

Watson, who's interested in restoring frescos, completed her most recent externship in New York and hopes to find her next opportunity abroad. She cited other students who have taken externships in Japan, Italy and more.

Across disciplines, ages and interests, the three students who talked with the

Charleston City Paper agreed: The externship program is a vital part of attending ACBA and preparing them for their careers.

"That was another thing that attracted me to school," Malcolm said. "[The externships] kind of, in a good way, force you to get into the professional world. Sometimes people need that little extra encouragement."

Learning from the best

In 2024, the ACBA will celebrate 20 years of educating artisans and growing the school. Though the school opened inside in the Old City Jail in 1999 as the School of the Building Arts, it wasn't until 2004 that it became a degree-granting institution under its current name.

In 2016, the school relocated to 649 Meeting St. with more workspaces.

The first graduating class in 2009 included seven students, according to ACBA's website. This year, the school welcomed 36 freshmen, bringing its student body total to 139.

"It's really cool that they keep people engaged," Watson said. "This is a university where I see the president of the college almost on a daily basis. ... He probably knows what every single trade is doing currently, so he's very, very active, and that's really cool. ... We really are a family."

Despite the growing popularity of this uniquely craft-centric college, Butler points out some stigmas around trade work remain, including the notion that trade work is somehow lesser than other professions.

"Trade work takes critical thinking that most people in the modern world are incapable of and the kind of trade training we do, you know, every day is different," she said.

Though Butler acknowledged that the stigma against women in trades seems to be fading some, it hasn't gone away completely. The supportive environment and confidence taught at ACBA empowers female students to choose their own path.

"Be prepared. Know your stuff. Know your trade," Caban said when asked what advice she would give women entering male-dominated trades.

"Sometimes we're held to a higher standard — be able to hold your own when you walk in. Don't undersell yourself. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated. Know your sources, get into the library. Take as many classes as you can once you leave here, [and] continue studying with different people. This is just the beginning of the rest of your life."