



Gina (left) and Kim Weston award photography scholarships to students annually and say art classes teach kids more than how to point and shoot.

## The War on Culture

**From kindergarten to community college, art education budgets are being slashed to the bone. And we're all going to pay the price.**

By [Jessica Lyons](#)

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**Kim and Gina Weston hosted the Weston Scholarship awards ceremony** in early May like they do every year, but this year's event at the Sunset Center was bittersweet.

To enter the contest, each student must create a portfolio of 10 black and white photographs; they take the photos, develop the film, print the negative and mount and spot each photograph for final presentation. Three Monterey Peninsula College students took home first-place awards with a \$1,000 scholarship for their portfolios.

“We are lucky to have such dedicated and talented instructors at our schools,” Gina told the audience of primarily students, parents and teachers. “You are producing our next generation of photographers. Without your commitment to teach these students, this fine art process may be lost.”

About a week later, MPC trustees voted unanimously to send final notices to seven faculty members who will be laid off at the end of the school year, including Kevin Bransfield, who chairs the community college's photography department. This means that instead of offering

eight classes, the school next fall will likely offer only two. “It’s the difference between 160 students taking photography classes and about 40 students,” Bransfield says.

Back at the Sunset Center, Gina says she and Kim, a noted photographer in his own right and grandson of famed photographer Edward Weston, hope the scholarship contest “will continue to inspire the passion of creating images in the darkroom.”

“The Monterey Peninsula has a long and rich history entrenched in photography,” Gina says. “It dates back to the early ‘20s in Carmel’s history. It’s a legacy that we need to keep alive.”

The legacy appears to be gasping for air.

In addition to Bransfield, the MPC trustees voted to lay off dance department chair Walter White (and five other full-time faculty members) in a move that will drastically reduce – if not completely eliminate – both fine-arts fields of study at the community college. The vote comes as trustees struggle to trim \$2 million from the school’s budget, anticipating deep cuts from the state.

A recent report by the President's Commission on the Arts and Humanities paints a bleak picture of arts education in public schools nationwide: Fewer than half of adults reported participating in arts lessons or classes in schools. In addition to tight school budgets, it blames the emphasis on test scores and accountability for basic skills, citing a study by the Center on Education Policy, which reported decreased arts education instruction time in 30 percent of school districts with at least one underperforming elementary school.

Locally, some public school kids, particularly in North and South County, wouldn’t have access to free music, visual arts or dance lessons if it weren’t for nonprofits like Alisal Center for the Fine Arts, Sunset Center’s Classroom Connections and the Arts Council for Monterey County’s Professional Artists in the Schools program.

“The whole notion of formal, regular arts education has almost disappeared,” says Paulette Lynch, executive director of the Arts Council. “And kids coming from low-income backgrounds have the least access to things outside of the classroom.”

“We’re losing more than just art teachers in school. If we continue down this road, killing off arts education, America 20 years from now will be a very dull, ugly place, with fewer painters and musicians. It will also be significantly poorer. We’ll lose our innovative engineers and creative business minds,” says Bob Lynch (no relation to Paulette), president of Americans for the Arts, a nonprofit that lobbies for arts funding at the local and federal levels.

“We don’t in America understand the full value of the arts and what the arts actually bring to our society,” he says. “We take for granted and have kept too much a secret the broad values beyond entertainment and beyond decoration that the arts bring – better communities, better community development, helping people be more creative in their work.”

Not only do we end up losing something that brings beauty and enjoyment and maybe some spiritual uplift – we also face the loss of an economic engine that contributes to the creation of some 750,000 businesses and 5.7 million jobs in America.

“We haven’t paid enough attention to the role the arts have played throughout our history,” Bob Lynch adds.

During the Revolutionary War, George Washington commissioned plays to inspire soldiers before they fought battles. Abraham Lincoln insisted the Capitol dome be finished – and funded – in the middle of the Civil War.

Much more recently, a new study by IBM found creativity is the most important quality for success in business leadership. The largest-known sample of one-on-one CEO interviews included more than 1,500 corporate heads and public sector leaders in 60 nations and 33 industries.

Even more important than integrity and global thinking in the business world, according to the CEOs, is creativity.

“American companies are worried about competitors like China and India,” Bob Lynch says. “But because of their sheer size, China and India are going to be able to turn out more of everything, and their people will work for less money. So what is our competitive edge? Creativity. And arts is the thing that brings creativity.

“Businesses say they want it, presidents and generals have employed the arts in their work – and still do today – and yet when it comes time to pay for it, is so easily allowed to slip away.” He adds that part of the price is our businesses will be less creative and our children less employable. “If we lose the arts, and arts education, we have destinations that are not as interesting to visit because arts are great tourist attractions,” he says. “We essentially have a nation that is not able to live up to the potential that it was built upon: its creativity, its innovation, its ability to change on a dime.”

Paulette Lynch says it’s a matter of prioritizing. The money is out there – it’s just that decision-makers are investing in other things. And while she’d love to say volunteerism is one answer, the reality is that a strong volunteer program still requires someone to steer it. “Many arts organizations offer free experiences and scholarships, but not in every town yet,” she says. “So paint, draw and sing with your children and neighbors. Bring them to everything. And keep lobbying for private – and public-sector dollars.”

Nonprofits are struggling to stay afloat as they, too, receive fewer dollars from the state and federal governments, and from individual donors feeling the economic pinch. Late last year, Dance Kids of Monterey County announced its 2010 holiday performance of the beloved Nutcracker Ballet would be its last because of lack of funding – the state stopped supplying grant money. While the nonprofit didn’t shutter its doors for good, it did cancel its spring productions and the future remains in limbo. “We’re still trying to raise funds to replace the \$150K we lost in

funding due to budget cuts,” Dance Kids Executive Director Alan Richmond explains. “So far we've only raised about \$30K but remain hopeful we'll find community members and individuals to help keep the program alive.”

Monterey County’s artistic roots run deep. The land has inspired writers and photographers alike, from John Steinbeck to Henry Miller and Ansel Adams to Edward Weston. From the landmark performances of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival to Carmel’s plein aire painters and bohemian Big Sur bellydancers, beauty and creativity are as strong of forces as the ocean’s currents

So what happens when budget cuts force the arts out?

“It’s mind boggling,” Kim Weston says, about MPC cutting its photography department. “Especially because of this area, my grandfather and Ansel Adams and the list goes on and on – and the photographers that are here now. This is more than just a photography class; this is the history of our community. It’s short-sighted not to have an incredibly strong photography department at MPC to draw people in from all over.”

But besides losing photography classes, Weston says, we’re also losing a piece of history – and a sense of community.

“It’s part of the fabric that this community is all about – the arts – be it the theater or writing or music or painting or photography. It brings excitement to our community. I don’t see why everybody isn’t up in arms. To lose that identity as a community is extremely sad. But we’re here fighting.”

**Carmel City Councilman Ken Talmage’s business** will bus Turlock-area kids to the inaugural exhibit, “Ansel Adams California,” at the new Carnegie Arts Center, which opens in September and runs through January 2012.

All Turlock-area field trips were cancelled because of budget cuts, says Jeanne Adams, who is married to Ansel Adam’s son and is curating the exhibition. “I am making captions that show California history as a fascinating process of people and place, which can kindle a real interest in learning more,” she says. “Yes, arts matter. Water matters. Life matters. Maybe ‘matter’ is an inadequate word?”

Adams and her husband, Michael, live in Carmel Highlands, dividing their time between the Central Coast home where Ansel Adams welcomed students, and Yosemite, where they run the Ansel Adams Galley.

If we lose arts, Adams says, we also lose a sense of civility.

“Art has been identified with civilization, and part of civility, of course, is communication. That includes ethics; that includes etiquette.”

In addition to “Ansel Adams California,” Adams is also developing an exhibition for Friday Harbor, Wash.-based Photokunst, titled “Fragile Waters.” It includes the work of three photographers: Ansel Adams, Dorothy Kerper Monnelly and Ernest Brooks. The exhibition will travel across the U.S., China and Germany

“As I read all of these things about water, all the legends, even when it’s an oral tradition, they go back to visual images. It’s an integral part of people’s lives in civilized society. I would hate to lose that on the basis of shortfalls.”

Funding arts is part of a holistic approach to society, she continues, and every bit as important as funding science or math – because an arts education helps students learn in those areas too.

“Studies indicate that the arts and a connection with beauty, wrestling with meaning, help learning and retention in other subject areas as well,” Adams says. “The creativity, coordination and observation that is required in visual and performing arts are all symbiotic.”

**Ansel Adams moved to the Peninsula in 1961** and became involved in the MPC photography department shortly thereafter. He sat on the advisory board in the ‘60s, worked with students and persuaded Polaroid and Kodak to support the program.

“Some MPC students have learned to load their black and white film from some of the most famous photographers in the world,” says Bransfield, who has chaired the department for five years. “The department has been around since the school first started. We tried to find an exact date – it’s within the first few years. Monterey is the most famous town in the U.S. for photography. It’s very embarrassing for MPC, the spiritual home of black and white photography.”

In addition to axing photography and dance classes at MPC, the cuts will limit student access. As many as 900 full-time students will be eliminated if state lawmakers decide on an all-cuts budget, according to MPC President Dr. Doug Garrison. And cutting arts classes further limits students who may not learn through traditional means.

“Arts are the heart and soul of the college – and extremely important,” Bransfield says. “We see this over and over again every semester: people fall in love with an art form, sometimes photography, sometimes a graphic arts program, print, sculpture, dance. People have different types of learning. Some are more left-brained, some more right-brained, some have very visual memory. But a lot of times when people find what they love, it ends up being a very validating experience. I’m afraid there’s a trend where we’re balancing the budget on the back of the arts.”

**Arts aren’t a necessity the way fresh-cut flowers** or an ocean view are necessities to some people. It’s a major economic engine for our community, Paulette Lynch says, “Arts is the answer!”

She points to a 2008 study (the most recent) that found the arts industries in Monterey County produce an annual output of about \$1 billion. It represents at least 7 percent of all jobs, which is

more than information and financial jobs, and nearly as many as educational and health services.

“Here’s the economic impact: If you invest a dollar, you’re going to get so many back, maybe \$20, maybe \$30. And that’s in so many areas – cultural tourism, education, workforce development and community vitality,” she says.

“If you go into a community that is really struggling, really blighted, not even a supermarket will go in at that point. But the artists will.”

She points to Alisal Center for the Fine Arts, Sand City’s West End, the Arts Habitat at East Garrison and also its new retail space in the Seaside City Center development. “They have vacancies, and they know when the economy recovers, they’ll get new business to come in, but in the meantime, what do they do? They can’t leave it there to deteriorate.”

So the Orosco Group, developers of the Seaside City Center, invited in Arts Habitat.

Artists set up studios in the 1,800-square-foot space where they collaborate and display work. The shop also has performance and meeting space available for the community use. “It was one, big, blank room but now it’s a collection of beautiful little studios. Instead of looking like some neglected place, it’s really vital.”

Shortly after our conversation, the President's Commission on the Arts and Humanities issues its report highlighting the importance of investing in arts training and education.

“In the global economy, creativity is essential,” U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan says in the forward. “Today’s workers need more than just skills and knowledge to be productive and innovative participants in the workforce. Just look at the inventors of the iPhone and the developers of Google: They are innovative as well as intelligent. Through their combination of knowledge and creativity, they have transformed the way we communicate, socialize and do business. Creative experiences are part of the daily work life of engineers, business managers, and hundreds of other professionals. To succeed today and in the future, America’s children will need to be inventive, resourceful, and imaginative. The best way to foster that creativity is through arts education.”

But it isn’t free. Painters need to buy canvas, brushes and paints. Photographers need cameras and lenses. Dancers need to buy shoes and pay rent.

“Artists need partners in the community,” Paulette Lynch says. “Artists will still always do art, but it won’t be at the level we need to attract tourists, to stimulate the economy, to heal our kids, to heal our seniors. They can’t do it alone. They’ll still sing, but it will be at home. That’s why funding is important.”

**Dancers undulate, ebb and flow to the sound of ocean waves** and solo guitar. Their cutting-edge performance – at Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, with its real estate hotel developers

would kill for and its researchers at the forefront of marine science worldwide – follows a talk about ocean acidification by Dr. James Barry, a top-tier scientist at Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI).

The unusual partnership between MBARI and SpectorDance is a fundraiser for the dance company's new project, Ocean, a multimedia dance work inspired by interviews with leading ocean scientists and underwater video footage. It's an ambitious idea: educate about climate change through music, movement and choreography.

Barry says the future of coral reefs looks bleak. Ocean warming is causing widespread coral bleaching and the death of coral reefs throughout the world. High CO2 levels are changing ocean chemistry, making it more difficult for many species to form calcium carbonate skeletons.

"We know quite a bit about how global warming and ocean acidification affect coral reefs, and if we don't start taking climate change seriously, it looks increasingly likely that tropical reefs will disappear before the end of the century," he says. "Take your kids to see coral reefs soon, so they'll love and appreciate them and, hopefully, take action to save reef systems and make ocean health in general a priority for their future."

"What is it going to take to change human behavior," Fran Spector Atkins asks rhetorically. She's largely preaching to the choir, a mix of marine biologists and dance patrons who sip Cima Colina wines and nibble lamb and tapanade appetizers prepared by Mama Selene, Quail Lodge's Executive Sous Chef. "As I take the path of this piece, I'm feeling very strongly what is needed is an intertransformation."

After Barry and the dancers made their pitch for species preservation, Spector Atkins and Dr. Daniel Fernandez, who chairs the division of science and environmental policy at CSU Monterey Bay, ask attendees to open their pocketbooks.

Says Lindholm: "\$150,000 a year is a mid-sized science grant. In the arts, \$15,000 is hitting it out of the park."

"We need a commitment to the arts and the oceans for future generations," Spector Atkins said. "We are at a moment in our community where we need support; we need to sustain dancers here. The vision of this project goes beyond today. It's about creating a dance company, which can create jobs and attract tourists. The future of our oceans; the future of our arts."