

The Things They Carried to The Things They Drew: Student Artists Reflect on Items of Personal Importance

By Amanda Bouvette

A teddy bear. A class ring. A bass guitar. A pocket Bible. A pair of headphones. A knife. The student artists each chose items of meaning, interpreting their assignment in different ways. What resulted was a series of still life drawings that gave glimpses into the hearts and lives of the artists.

This October and November, the New River Community College library featured the artwork of students in Drawing 121 in its *The Things They Carried* Pen and Ink Artwork exhibit. The students' assignment, inspired by the book *The Things They Carried*, was to choose items from their lives that had meaning to them and which would bring them comfort if they were to travel away from their families, and then draw the items as a still life portrait. Some students chose to do a variation on the project by choosing items that represented important things and relationships in their lives.



Student artists in the Drawing 121 class

The exhibit was one of the events in The Big Read NRV for 2015, which featured the book *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. It began when Sandy Smith, the head librarian at NRCC, was contacted by the librarians at Radford University. The university and its partners had been given a grant that they would spread among other universities, and NRCC acquired a part of this grant money. Sandy Smith contacted Tammy Parks, an art professor at NRCC, to help, and she modified one of the art projects her drawing students would already be working on that semester to provide artwork for the exhibit.

The art exhibit was not the only Big Read event held on the New River Community College campus. The kickoff event for The Big Read NRV, "Field Notes on *The Things They Carried*," was held in Rooker Hall on October 3. This event featured the speaker Dr. Alex Vernon, an expert on Tim O'Brien. According to Sandy Smith and reference librarian Yvonne Maute, this event was successful, as was The Big Read NRV in general. Being the first Big Read series of

events in the New River Valley, the venture was experimental, but across the counties, communities, and universities involved, there was good participation, and many free copies of *The Things They Carried* were distributed to the public.

As for the artwork, Tammy Parks observed that many of the students thought back to and chose objects that related to their childhood. She also noted a generational gap as the younger students often included items of technology, such as cell phones or headphones. In addition to drawing the still life, each student wrote a short reflection piece to help explain the choices in objects they made. Three of the students' drawings illustrate some of the differences in the approaches that were taken in creating the art.

Ashlyn Spence – Comforts of Home

“My still life represents things I would take with me if I traveled to a new place.” Ashlyn chose to draw a hand-held mirror, a phone, headphones, her pillow, and her journal—items that she would take on a trip to reassure her. She wrote in her reflection that the mirror was included as a



means to check her appearance, but also to talk to herself and remind herself that everything is okay. Her phone was included as a means to contact her friends. The headphones would be used to keep her calm and help her fall asleep if necessary. Her pillow would give her comfort and remind her of home. She could collect thoughts and new experiences—which she called “adventures”—in her journal. These elements show how she would want to stay connected to her home and the people she cared about, and how remembering her home would help her feel better in a new place.

Ashlyn had not read *The Things They Carried*, but she expressed a desire to do so. As for the art itself, she enjoyed working on the shading and especially the detail.

A’me Baber – Important Things in Her Life

“I’ve chosen five objects to represent my life.” A’me chose to draw the TARDIS from the TV show “Doctor Who,” her cell phone and its charger, her Bible, and a picture of her grandfather and herself. The TARDIS represented her love of sci-fi shows, especially “Doctor Who.” Her cell phone illustrated the way “young people today don’t go anywhere without their cell phone[s],” but she was sure to add the charger, knowing that a cell phone is worthless if it is not



charged. A'me added the photo of her and her grandfather because, she wrote, "he means the world to me." He gave her the photo and the Bible before he died. She said that she would be devastated to lose or not have these any of these items with her. Regarding the art, A'me said that it was more difficult to do than she thought it would be as she had to work with shading and the size of the items.

Glen Richardson – A Moment in History

Glen had a unique approach to the assignment. He wrote about his artwork, titled "Fall Out 1962," by saying, "For 13 long days in 1962, the world faced the real threat of nuclear annihilation brought on by two warring tribes of man. I grew up hearing the stories of survival plans my parents and grandparents made during those 13 days which includes some of these artifacts." As an artist, Glen wanted to tell the story of that particular time in history. He included a pack of cards, a bottle of iodide, a revolver, a radio, and a helmet in his still life drawing. All the items work together to create a different meaning than they would have taken separately.



A fishing pole. A camera. A pencil. Although the student artists may not have experienced war the way Tim O'Brien did, they still knew that the *things* they carried in their lives were important to them, but oftentimes because they reminded them or connected them to the people and relationships that matter most.