

Are the Arts Getting Snubbed During the 2013 Women's History Month?

Written by Ginny Grimsley

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3 Reasons Girls Need Music as Much as Math

One simple yet profound quote by Emily Dickinson might summarize the position of women throughout much of the history of the United States: "I dwell in possibility."

Today, women have choices that most of their predecessors just a half century ago did not. Professions once dominated by men are open to them; they can have a successful career and a family -- or choose to remain independent throughout their lives.

"As we observe Women's History Month in March, we need to take stock of our past but also look to the future," says Elayne James, author of "Destiny's Call," the first installment of the young adult fantasy series "The LightBridge Legacy," (www.lightbridgelegacy.com).

"This year's emphasis during Women's History Month is on the STEM fields – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. I understand that the United States is lagging in these disciplines, but I join my voice with the many who feel the arts and STEM education should not be mutually exclusive. Both are equally important, and actually very complementary fields of study, for both girls and boys."

James reviews the many ways in which the arts can benefit a young woman's education:

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• Mentors and outside-the-box teaching: Young girls need to learn in many different ways and by using all their senses, including their innate creativity. "Parents and educators in the STEM disciplines often have a clear agenda for kids, but mentors in the arts teach students to tap into a more personal well," says James. "That kind of individual evolution supports girls heading into their teen years by instilling a level of confidence and sense of self that traditional education doesn't always provide. They will be better equipped for the emotional complexities and challenges of being young women."

• Ample studies supporting academic improvement: Research throughout the past decade and earlier consistently show students who participate in arts perform higher on tests involving critical thinking, reading comprehension, oral examinations and various standardized tests. Studies from the Arts Education Partnership, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Rand Corp., Johns Hopkins University and several school districts reveal comprehensive benefits to arts education, including an improved ability to adjust to real-world circumstances.

• The STEM fields are not monolithic: Anyone who thinks the STEM disciplines do not require creative thought does not understand them, James says. As in the visual arts, music and literature, there are rules to follow in STEM, but advances in these fields come with inspiration and ingenuity. "What better way to illustrate creative genius than with the arts?" she says. "Women's History Month is a reminder of the strides women have made in every field – a young girl is not an island unto herself, and neither are her interests."

• A reason to stay in school: James credits the arts for saving her academic career. "I'd fallen in with a bad group in high school my freshman year; kids who didn't care about school and thought it was 'cool' to defy authority," she says. "I began ditching class every day. If it weren't for acceptance into one of the school's musical arts programs, my life would've been very different. Instead of becoming a high school dropout, I became an honor student, going from 'F's to 'A's, from hating school to loving it. Because of music, I graduated with a 4.0 GPA, and got into a good college. The arts literally transformed my life."

"The arts programs keep kids interested and involved in school, keeps their cognitive skills sharp, and provides vital social interaction, fostering rich relationships that can last a lifetime," says James. "Art teaches the perception of beauty. It is essential humankind. Without it we would surely perish."

About Elayne James

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Elayne G. James has been a lifelong advocate of the arts. In addition to being an author, she has been a recording artist, a Hollywood sound effects editor, a successful playwright, a theatrical lighting designer, a graphic artist and a professional photographer. Through her series The LightBridge Legacy, she inspires young people to embrace their individuality and believe in themselves. She lives in Southern California.