

## ► In The News

# HCC art gallery director's farewell exhibition a 'love letter'

HOLYOKE – “Back in the old days,” she says, before the Taber Art Gallery existed, Amy Johnquest managed what was then a casual gallery on the lower level of the Campus Center near the Holyoke Community College cafeteria.

After a few years, though, she decided HCC needed a more formal area to display the work of local artists. “Because,” she recently recalled, “down there, you had students necking on couches, and, nothing wrong with, but not in the gallery, you know? There were coffee splatters on the walls. It was just a hard place to show artwork.”

She put out a query to college administrators about the same time local businessman Donald Taber was searching for a place to house his art collection.

The collaboration became the Taber Art Gallery, with Johnquest installed as its first – and so far only – director.

“It’s first and foremost purpose was to be a teaching gallery, so that students could come in and get an idea of what the art world is like,” said Johnquest. “I’ve always for the most part shown area artists because the Valley is just full of fabulous talent.”

As she prepares to retire from HCC at the end of the spring semester, Johnquest, 64, has curated her final exhibition, “Upward and Onward,” an homage to her 24 years as Taber Art Gallery director.



Director Amy Johnquest takes a final spin through HCC's Taber Art Gallery.

*Submitted photo*

“My big goodbye,” she calls it. “My love letter. My thank-you note to the folks and cosmic forces that swirled around and got me here.”

“Upward and Onward” will be on display in the Taber Art Gallery through March 3.

“I do feel a little sad,” said Johnquest, who lives in Holyoke and maintains an art studio in Easthampton.

“A person’s job, especially if they like what they do and love what they do, it’s very much part of their identity. And when you leave that job, you’re leaving a part of your identity. I am 64, which is a good age. I’ll be spending a lot more time in my studio, so I am looking forward to that.”

Johnquest invited friends, family members, and colleagues to contribute

their art to “Upward and Onward,” which also includes photos and paintings of herself as a child growing up in a town with the art-worthy name of Novelty, Ohio.

“I brought in works from my personal collection as well as from the college, and tossed in a couple of my own paintings,” said Johnquest, whose nickname in the Valley art scene is “Banner Queen.”

The result is an exhibition of some 150 pieces from more than 40 contributors.

“My goal was to include everything – which was very nearly accomplished,” said Johnquest. “There is a whole art to the installation process. It’s much like creating a collage. One needs to find a way to bring companionship to disparate works, to give the entire space a sense of flow, and though quite crowded, give a sense that the individual pieces can stand alone as well as talk nicely with each other.”

The only preplanned part of the installation, she said, was peppering the gallery with photos of people kissing.

“Because, well, like I said, this is a love letter.”

The Taber Art Gallery, located off the lobby of the HCC Library on the second floor of the HCC Donahue Building, is free and open to the public Monday through Thursday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. during regular school sessions.

For more information, please contact Amy Johnquest, at (413) 552-2614.