

## **ALUMNA OF THE YEAR – Sue (Rogers) Etheridge**

### ***A Life Purpose Worth Waiting For***

When Sue (Rogers) Etheridge left CBU in 1968, she was only one semester shy of graduating with a degree in Spanish. But in 1968, the husband's career always came first. "In those days it was a different world," Sue recalled. "My husband graduated and he was ready to go to seminary, so there was no thought of waiting for me to graduate."

And so it came as a great surprise to Sue that she was named CBU's Alumna of the Year for 2014. "It's an honor I just could not have imagined," Sue said. "I never did anything but show up and do my job. It's the work that is so great."

While supporting her husband through seminary and raising two young children, Sue would end up waiting 10 years before returning to school. But there were some important signs along the way that would point her toward a career she could not have imagined.

"You know, when you lack one semester of finishing [your degree], you are either over qualified or under qualified for everything," Sue reflected. "I was working in a sign shop doing hand lettering. When it's 40 degrees, with 40 mph winds, and you're up a 40-foot ladder painting a sign, you see the need to go back to school." And with that, Sue returned to college and obtained a bachelor's degree in Commercial Art in 1980.

But her journey didn't end there. After obtaining her art degree, Sue began to see the bigger picture while working as a hospice volunteer. "I was sitting with a patient whose wife had asked me to give her some respite," Sue recalled. "It was emotionally taxing, and so I got pencil and paper and started drawing him. I discovered how emotionally healthy that was."

That experience inspired Sue to obtain her master's degree in Art Therapy in 1991. During this time, she did an internship at the Federal Correctional Complex in Butner, North Carolina, where she would go on to work for the next 24 years.

As an art therapist, Sue is tasked with assessing and treating psychiatric patients through the analysis of their artwork. "They love it," Sue said. "They're in a place with low stimulation, very little color, very restricted abilities to make decisions, and I tell them, 'on that page, you are the boss.'"

Throughout her career, Sue has developed numerous innovative programs to address the various needs of her patients. But there is one that remains near to her heart. "I put together a program for involuntarily committed sex offenders," Sue said. "They can be kept in prison until they are no longer dangerous, which might be never."

The goal of treatment for this particular group is to develop empathy, and to provide a sense of meaning in their lives. Sue saw the perfect opportunity to do both by once again serving patients in the hospice unit. "People don't think of hospice in prison, but if

someone gets a life sentence, they're going to end up in hospice," She explained. "This group could really empathize with someone who was dying in prison."

Sue's group began making small afghans for the hospice patients, which would then become a gift for the patient's family after his death. The inmates also wrote a sympathy card to accompany the blanket, which read, "This afghan, which warmed your loved one, was made for him by a group of his peers, with the hope that you will be comforted knowing he was well cared for."

And so it's no surprise that Sue was honored as an "Unsung Hero of Compassion" by the Dalai Lama Foundation earlier this year. The award was in response to an exhibit she procured for the prison's medical center, based on "The Missing Peace: Artists and the Dalai Lama." This world famous exhibit featured works of contemporary artists honoring the peacemaking efforts of the Dalai Lama, and Sue was invited to speak to the curatorial staff about art therapy. Upon hearing about her work, they provided her with poster reproductions of several works so she could share the exhibit at prison.

"It was so heartwarming to bring that to the inmates," Sue recalled. She also compiled a book of photographs of their exhibit to send to the Dalai Lama. "I asked the inmates, 'what message would you like to send to him?' They simply replied, 'think of us.'" And so when Sue received her award from the Dalai Lama himself, her message to him was, "thank you for thinking of people in prison."

Today, Sue has transitioned to the state prison system, where new opportunities and challenges await. "[This job] has developed a sense of human understanding in me," Sue said. "It has made me a strong, confident woman. I can walk into a group of people on death row, and I can hold my head high and my expectation of them is that I'm going to be fine, and I am fine. Never in a million years would I have guessed that I would do this work, but it has become the vocation for me."