Right brains, left brains find expression in ‘Signatures’

For 25 years, magazine has showcased student art and literary work

With so much information, I can’t pause
To think about what I truly do know
Such facts and figures! And with quite good cause,
As wisdom does your education show.

Excerpted from Sonnet #5
Robert Wilko, Signature Magazine 2009

The above lines not only exhibit the talent of the author but also present a perfect illustration of the often overwhelming inundation of information college students experience.

Providing an outlet for this type of creativity and emotional release has long been the dual goal of Signatures Magazine, RIT’s student-run arts and literary journal, which is marking its 25th anniversary in 2010. “Signatures has been an incredibly important component of RIT’s efforts to promote artistic expression and meld the left brain and the right brain on campus,” says Robert Ulms, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, home of the publication. “Its longevity and the quality of the work produced is a testament to the talented and dedicated students and faculty who have worked on the publication through the years.”

The magazine’s prominence also goes far beyond the RIT campus, thanks to the success of many of its former staffers and contributors as well as its growing industry and academic recognition. For example, the 2008 edition of the magazine received a Gold Crown Award, presented by the Columbia Scholastic Press Association of Columbia University. Signatures was honored in the best college magazine category and was one of only 10 college magazines selected nationally.

Signatures was founded in 1985 by Sam Abrams, professor of English, and Joel Oppenheimer, longtime columnist for the Village Voice, who served as RIT’s Caroline Werner Gannett Professor of the Humanities during the 1985-86 academic year. “There had been earlier attempts to create a literary magazine on campus, but we wanted to develop a permanent organization that could develop and publish a professional quality magazine annually,” notes Abrams. “We also felt it was important that the publication itself and the content provided be driven by RIT’s students. I think that has been our own thing that was our own.”

Throughout its history, the magazine has provided a showcase for student poetry, fiction, art, photography and, more recently, film and animation, while also allowing the editorial staff to gain experience in putting together an annual, multi-media publication.

Many RIT graduates who have gone on to careers in the arts and publishing had their first published work or their first editorial byline in Signatures. “Being able to create a full magazine that represented the creative talent on campus was a wonderful experience, and inspired me to continue showcasing art and literary works in my own community,” says Erica Eichelkraut ’07 (photo illustration), who served as editor of Signatures in 2006 and 2007 and is now president and publisher of NOMAD, a Buffalo-based art and literary magazine. “I loved the freedom and the responsibility the editorial staff was given to truly create something that was our own.”

In addition to Eichalkraut, former Signature staffers include Whitney Gratton ’98 (illustration), now a marketing coordinator with National Public Radio. Art and poetry contributors to the publication over the years have included Jessamyn Lovell ’99 (photo illustration), now a freelance photographer and winner of the 2007 Aperture Portfolio Prize, and glass artist Pat Bako ’02 (glass), currently the director of the glass department at the Pratt Fine Arts Center in Seattle.

“Signatures was an editorial and design
internship without leaving RIT,” notes Gratton, who served as design coordinator for the 2008 edition. “Working on the magazine was a collaborative experience where I wore many different hats and learned so much about working on a publication from start to finish, within a non-profit organization.”

“The publication is intentionally structured to allow the student staff a tremendous amount of leeway in developing the themes, structure and look of each year’s magazine,” says John Roche, associate professor of English and current faculty adviser for the magazine. “We have also encouraged a wide range of poetry and art submissions from all components of the student body, including art students, engineers and computer scientists. The goal really is to provide an expressive outlet for the tremendously varied and talented students RIT possesses.”

That level of freedom to pursue different creative paths has led to some truly unique issues and marketing efforts over the years, including one “magazine” edition that was a series of postcards bound in a creatively illustrated package, and an announcement for magazine submissions delivered in fortune cookies that were passed out in campus dining rooms.

The anniversary celebration included The 25 Show, a showcase of new artwork from RIT students and alumni as well as a display of past issues at Gallery r, RIT’s off-campus showcase in Rochester. RIT also produced a commemorative chapbook featuring a sampling of artwork, photography and writing from previous editions of the magazine. Finally, the current Signatures staff co-sponsored the Word Sensorium featuring poetry from the 2010 magazine, faculty poetry, musical performances and digital visualizations as part of the Imagine RIT: Innovation and Creativity Festival May 1.

Roche hopes that the celebration of Signatures’ past will assist in promoting continued artistic expression on campus and beyond, while current and future editions of the magazine inspire others to create their own art.

“RIT’s unique blend of art and technology allows for new mediums and avenues of expression to be explored in amazing ways,” he adds. “I cannot wait to see what Signatures looks like a decade from now.”

All issues of Signatures can be accessed as pdfs at RIT’s Digital Media Library, online at https://ritdml.rit.edu/handle/1850/873.