Nathan England was fresh out of grad school, MFA in hand, ready to retreat to the studio and be an artist, when his career took an unexpected detour. Five years later, the artist who had never considered teaching is coordinating the Associate of Fine Arts Degree Program at New River Community and Technical College’s Greenbrier Valley Campus in Lewisburg.

Invited to teach a course as an adjunct instructor at New River in 2004, England soon found himself teaching five courses while at the same time helping develop the curriculum for a new degree program. By the fall of 2008, New River’s Associate of Fine Arts degree was a reality.
“We are extremely pleased to be the first community and technical college in the state to offer an associate degree in fine arts. The arts enrich our lives and allow us to communicate our innermost feelings with others in a way that can’t be matched by any other discipline,” says Dr. Harry R. Faulk, executive vice president and chief academic officer at New River.

According to New River President Ted D. Spring, the decision to locate the program on the Greenbrier Valley Campus was an easy one.

“There is a vibrant arts community in the Greenbrier Valley, and we have received enthusiastic support for this program from artists, gallery owners and arts organizations,” Spring comments.

England agrees, noting that Lewisburg is one of only two communities in West Virginia that have been designated Certified Arts Communities by the West Virginia Division of Culture and History. Letters of support from organizations such as Lewisburg’s Carnegie Hall and Greenbrier Valley Theatre were instrumental in getting approval for the program at the state level, he says.

The program offers two tracks: studio arts and arts management. Studio arts synchs with the basic courses four-year fine arts programs offer in the first two years—
The majority of Fine Arts students are pursuing the studio arts track and plan to continue on for a bachelor’s degree. England’s goal is to assure that they can compete at the same level or above when they move into a four-year program. “There is no cut in quality to stay here,” he says.

Mark Trent is a prime example of the trajectory that England foresees for his students. Although he was interested in photography, the Ronceverte resident never thought he would have an opportunity to pursue it as a career. He was taking general education courses at New River when he enrolled in England’s Introduction to Visual Arts class. Recognizing Trent’s potential, England encouraged him to apply to the prestigious Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD).
“He pushed me a lot and wouldn’t let me get discouraged,” Trent recalls, adding that England wrote him a letter of recommendation and even took him to Savannah for his interview. Trent is now entering his second semester of studies towards a BFA in photography. He earned Dean’s List honors in his first semester.

England, who earned his undergraduate degree in photography from SCAD and a graduate degree in studio arts from the Memphis College of Art, brought a broad perspective to development of the arts curriculum. And he points to the Mac lab where digital photography classes are taught as an example of the excellent equipment available to students.

“We have programs and hardware comparable to any four-year program. It’s just smaller. We want to push technology, because it is critical in fine arts today, but you also need to offer traditional media such as painting,” he comments.

In addition to visual arts and humanities courses taught by England and adjunct faculty, the college has partnered with area arts organizations such as Greenbrier Valley Theatre and the Greenbrier Valley Chorale to offer courses in the performing arts.

Students in the program have formed a particularly close bond, in large part because of Allied Student Artists (ASA), a student-run organization that England promotes as a way to give the students something outside the classroom that is their own. The group takes field trips to art museums and arts programs at other colleges in the region, including one trip to Washington, DC or another large city during the Christmas break. They group has set up a Facebook page where they can post their own work or share art that they find intriguing. They also mount an annual exhibit at Lewisburg’s Carnegie Hall, making them only one of two annual exhibitors there.

“Part of ASA’s mission is to help students grow outside the classroom,” England explains. It creates student interaction. It’s their own community. It helps them develop relationships that last beyond graduation.”

Heather Logsdon of White Sulphur Springs, president of ASA, says that her involvement with the group has given her new ideas about working with people who have a different aesthetic from her own. Logsdon was excited when she found out about New River’s program from her high school art teacher. She had been planning to enroll in general education courses, but changed her mind when she found out about the arts degree. Be-
cause she would “rather make art than sell it,” she enrolled in the Studio Arts tract.

“I really wasn’t ready to go directly to a big college. I’m glad I started here first. You work at your own pace and get more one-on-one with your instructors,” she comments.

For Greta Davis of Clintonville, the program offers a belated chance to pursue a lifelong interest in interior design. She had worked in the medical field since the age of 18, but had to quit her job due to bad health. She enrolled in the Fine Arts program and is determined to go on for a four-year degree in design. “I’m not going to give up. I will keep going if it takes me a long time,” she insists.

England says the mixture of younger and older students is a plus for both groups.

“The non-traditional students
have been a great experience. Their perspective is so different. They sit down with programs they have never been exposed to before and are in class with very young students who have always been on the computer. A great relationship develops. The younger ones help the older ones, and the older students bring experience that enriches the program for younger students.”

Now that the program is off the ground, England is excited about the many ways in which it can grow and develop. Growth is already assured thanks to a recently signed agreement between New River and Concord University which allows students to complete a four-year Fine Arts degree on the Greenbrier Valley Campus. The first two years will be completed in New River’s program. Students will then transfer to Concord, but all classes will be taught by Concord faculty on the Lewisburg campus.

“We're hoping the Fine Arts degree program will help expand the focus of our campus to draw students regionally, especially with the agreement with Concord,” says Greenbrier Valley Campus Dean Roger Griffith. “It will give our local students the ability to stay home and get their associate's or bachelor’s degree, and students from outside the area can come here and experience this exciting arts community. This program has added a new dimension for our campus.”

Another reason for excitement is that New River has received approval to move forward with plans to convert the former Student Activities Building on the campus into a fine arts building. The legislature ap-
proved funding for the renovation last year, but sale of the bonds was delayed due to the economic situation. Now the project is back on the front burner, and President Spring says that the college will host focus groups with students, faculty and community leaders to determine how to best use the space.

As facilities expand, England would like to expand the program into other disciplines. “Photography is something we are definitely interested in, and we may look into digital imaging for newspaper photographers or printing firms so that people can update their skills and further their careers. I have even talked to the criminal justice instructor about offering a skill set in crime scene photography,” England says. “Design and marketing are also possibilities, and we would be very interested in developing a two-plus-two degree in arts education.”

Chief Academic Officer Faulk foresees a time when the program could even be expanded to include tracks in dance, theatre and music. England says that the decision as to which new disciplines to add will be based on input from the community. “The college should serve the community’s needs and interests,” he affirms.

For England, the transformation from art school graduate to artist and educator has been exhausting, and the learning curve has been steep. But the rewards are enormous. “My students are not passive,” he says. They are getting something they have never been exposed to before, and they do not take it for granted.”