The Story of Paradise
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As rain drizzled over Norman Bird Sanctuary’s hundreds of acres, Roger Williams University Students walked under the eaves of rustic, wood slat sided buildings. They refuged in the comforting lights and warm wood walls of the Sanctuary’s studio space.

Winslow Homer’s painting “Breeze Up” hung above the dusty, dormant, brick fireplace. Stuffed birds roosted above the bookshelf. Black and white paintings hung on the wall—commemorating Mabel Norman (1875-1949), the founder of the Sanctuary. She left her 325 acres—the largest open space on Aquidneck Island—to the community, so bird and wildlife habitats could be preserved forever. RWU students will be redesigning her memorial in the studio.

Assistant Professor Anne Proctor’s Museum Studies course will spend the fall 2014 semester coordinating with the Community Partnerships Center and working in teams with four museums throughout Rhode Island. A selected group of students from the course will be working on designing displays that present the historic significance of the Norman Bird Sanctuary.

The RWU students’ project will embody Mabel’s story in a dynamic, engaging, visually gripping three-dimensional display. It will express her quiet, private, indoor nature, her imagination and her method of figuring out humanity by painting portraits. The pastoral painters who visited her, like John LaFarge, sketched the land and the sea around them, calling it Paradise Valley.

Most people visit the Sanctuary to be in nature. They walk the seven miles of trails, on one of the oldest farmscapes in the country, to look at the trees, smell the salty ocean breeze and hear the calling of birds. History, art and education aren’t on the average visitor’s mind. Students face the challenge of creating a display that is eye catching and engaging enough to draw in an audience that is not necessarily invested in the topic. “It’s an interesting sneak attack approach,” said Professor Anne Proctor.
Students will give casual observers a snapshot of Mabel Norman’s life and mission, an easy to digest story with inherent, universal value.

RWU students also toured the Paradise House, which has been restored over the past ten years. To maintain historic integrity, everything has been dismantled, refurbished and placed back where it came. The house has an understated utilitarian simplicity. The Sanctuary would like to see another display designed for the dinning room, where people who rent the house tend to gravitate. “Were excited to see what they come up with,” Harrison said of the students. “We’re hungry for something that works.”