The challenge in telling the unique story of Bonnie Johanna Gisel is where to begin. She is an artist, scholar, author, environmentalist and educator. She works among the majestic, natural beauty of Yosemite National Park in California as curator of the Sierra Club’s LeConte Memorial Lodge. She has earned a PhD, Master of Divinity, and Master of Fine Arts degree, not to mention a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Daemen College in 1970. On top of all that, she is a leading authority on John Muir, the well-known nineteenth century botanist and pioneer environmentalist in North America.

Bonnie Gisel explains that everything about her story really first took root during her education at Daemen College. “I loved my time at Daemen and can’t emphasize enough how much of a genesis took place for me as a young artist there,” she says.

The influence of nature

Growing up in Western New York, Bonnie spent plenty of time outdoors in nature. Her father loved to fish and camp and the family enjoyed many trips to the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains. “I learned the geography of the area and understood the four sea-
sons because I was always engaged in them," she recalls. "I began to see how art is so influenced by the world we live in - the natural colors, the landscape, and the horizon."

An art student in high school, Bonnie chose Daemen (Rosary Hill at the time) for college because of its excellent art department and range of experienced faculty in every media from sculpture to painting and drawing, all underscored by a great art history department, led by Sister Jeanne File.

Bonnie recalls how Daemen professors such as James Allen, a painting instructor, gave her the confidence to continue growing as an artist. She says upon graduation, it was that Daemen-instilled confidence that led her to pursue an M.F.A. at Rochester Institute of Technology (R.I.T.).

Connecting art and the natural world.

Following R.I.T., Bonnie returned to teach art for one year at Daemen College. All along, she continued as a practicing studio artist, and she remembers showing her work at a faculty art exhibit at Daemen. A career opportunity then took her to the Hudson River area of New York where she worked in research at Vassar College and participated in the Hudson Valley Art Association.

Bonnie then joined the Genesee Country Museum staff, located in Mumford, New York. During this period, she says she began to feel a strong spiritual calling and a desire to study the creations of God -- the natural world. Her son, Nikolaus, had been born and her appreciation of the celebration of life grew. She began to think about the world he would inherit. When Nikolaus was five, Bonnie entered divinity school.

"My deep abiding love for the natural world and my academic and artistic training were becoming one," she explains.

Bonnie earned a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard University and served as a student minister, a chaplain at Strong Hospital, in Rochester, New York, and was a candidate for ministry in the Presbyterian Church, USA. As her spirituality grew, she also became more focused on environmental studies, leading her to apply for a Ph.D. program at Drew University Caspersen School of Graduate Studies. She was accepted and attended Drew on a full scholarship in Nineteenth-Century Interdisciplinary Historical Studies.

Nature’s Beloved Son.

While studying at Drew University, Bonnie discovered the work of John Muir and read his book "A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf", a record of Muir’s walk in 1867 from Indiana across Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida to the Gulf Coast. Bonnie says she found a kindred spirit in Muir and his study of the creations of God. "I honed in on Muir because of his spiritual qualities and the sacrifices he made to follow his passion as a botanist, nature writer and preservationist," she explains.

Studying Muir’s life and writings led Bonnie down the path of authorship herself. She has written three books on Muir: "Kindred & Related Spirits: The Letters of John Muir and Jeanne C. Carr"; "Nature Journal with John Muir"; and the most recent, "Nature's Beloved Son: Rediscovering John Muir’s Botanical Legacy". For "Nature’s Beloved Son", Bonnie worked with photographer, Stephen J. Joseph, to capture beautiful images of the plant specimens that Muir collected and studied, bringing them to life in brilliantly enhanced reproductions. The Washington Post called the book a "testament to Muir’s contributions to the botanical world", while Audubon Magazine said the book is "a remarkable publishing event".

A nationwide traveling exhibition has been created based on “Nature’s Beloved Son” showing original botanical specimens collected by Muir, high resolution prints of his botanicals, historic photos and other Muir writings and drawings. Bonnie has lectured on John
Muir in association with the exhibit which has been hosted in cities such as Oakland, California and Atlanta, Georgia.

**Yosemite and the Sierra Club.**

Bonnie notes that her current work with the Sierra Club and Yosemite National Park is a natural progression of her dedication to John Muir and his work. Muir convinced U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt to protect Yosemite Valley and other lands as national parks. Muir, hailed as the “father of our national parks service”, was also the co-founder and first president of the Sierra Club.

As curator and environmental educator at the LeConte Memorial Lodge, Bonnie helps spread Muir’s message, and teaches thousands of visitors at Yosemite every year about nature, Muir, and the Sierra Club. She calls herself a “professor at the University of the Wilderness”. A National Historic Landmark, the Lodge was built in 1904 and the Sierra Club continues to provide public programs, educational displays and a library there, all under Bonnie’s direction. She leads over 120 volunteers and staff in educating more than 16,000 visitors who come to the lodge during the five months it is open each year.

**The Next Chapters**

Bonnie points out that in her mind, it’s not where she has been; it’s where she is going. She is working on another book on John Muir titled “Of a Public Nature”, a work she says will probably be her last project involving the famed naturalist and preservationist. The book will consist of writings and articles of John Muir that have never been seen by the public before. Of course, she continues to move back to Yosemite each spring as the parks season opens.

“I like to think of myself as an environmental historian who continues to be focused on this overarching, engaging opportunity to encourage people to see the world as if it’s always brand new,” she explains.

Bonnie says when she was a student at Daemen, she had no idea her journey would lead to where she is today. But she reiterates the important influence of Daemen in planting the artistic and academic seeds that got her started. “From the art studios to the library -- that was magic for me,” she concludes. "The professors at Daemen presented me with a great sense of opportunities and range of possibilities for a young artist."

“The seed-bed of who I was becoming was well-grounded at Daemen, as my art professors all pushed me to become better and better.”