

Karen Donde

By Suzie Jenkins

Karen Donde is the secretary of the South Jersey Guild. She is an amazing promoter of weaving and spends much of her time demonstrating, teaching and telling anyone who will listen the benefits of being a guild member. She is also writing for Interweave Press, working on her COE in Handweaving, and weaving for guild sales. I wanted to find out how she prioritized her time and the result is this short interview.

What was it that got your attention about weaving and lead to what you are doing now?

The wonderful people in the South Jersey Guild of Spinners & Handweavers. I saw a photo of coordinator Naomi Cannon in the newspaper with an open invitation to new weavers and spinners. I had just moved to South Jersey, and had always been curious about weaving. I attended a special demonstration held at Naomi's home in January 1999, got my hands on her shuttle and my feet on her treadles, and something inside me came alive. Within a few months I had purchased a second-hand loom and Deborah Redding Chandler's book, joined the guild and started taking weaving lessons from Naomi.

The enthusiasm and support of Naomi and all the local weavers I met helped me work through early frustrations, and the excitement of turning yarns into cloth in beautiful patterns and colors left me always hungry for the next project. I'm fascinated that there's always something new to learn. And despite all that I've learned so far, I'm frequently amazed by how much I don't know. That's one reason I'm working on the Certificate of Excellence in Handweaving program. This is a fabulous course of study for someone who's still exploring techniques and structures, because it gives direction to the study and requires thorough understanding and excellent execution.

I also love teaching, and hope my current work will make me a better teacher. My bachelor's degree is in journalism, so I've been writing professionally for more than 20 years. Since I became a weaver, I've been looking for ways to combine my writing skills with my weaving passion. I met Madelyn van der Hoogt at the MAFA conference in 2005. I was amazed that her first weaving school was not far from where I grew up in Central Missouri, and made a point to say hello. I had left Missouri to "seek my fortune" before she opened her studio there, but it was fun to talk about familiar places with her.

Her talk to the group focused on the need to keep finding new weavers, so I contacted her after MAFA and asked if she could use a story that helped guilds and teachers answer the question, "So how do we do that?" That first story, "Fishing for New Weavers," ran January/February 2006. I'll have another one coming out in Handwoven this spring, and am working on a third.

What motivated you to weave?

The love of fabrics, the feel of the yarn, the action of the loom, the creation of beautifully patterned cloth all fed something deep inside. Maybe it came from a distant ancestor who left something in my DNA. I don't really know why, I just know I have to do it.

How do you discipline yourself to go to your studio?

I try to always have a new project in the design stage before I finish what's on the loom. Plus, I've always wanted a bumper sticker that says, "I'd rather be weaving." It doesn't take much discipline, because I really would rather be at the loom than almost anywhere else. The discipline is required to get all my other chores and work done so I can go weave.

Where does your design inspiration come from?

Weaving magazines and books, old and new. Sometimes pictures I find or take. Often I start with a structure I've wanted to try, an interesting yarn I've collected or purchased, and then find an idea that fits the available yarn and structure. I'm also inspired by workshops, classes and conferences. I recently invested in Fiberworks PCW. Just playing around with possibilities on it can help bring an abstract idea into focus.

Do you teach? Why?

Yes. Two reasons. First I really enjoy teaching others to weave. The only thing more satisfying than pulling my own new project off the loom is watching a student do the same. Second, I believe it's important for the future of weaving and all fiber crafts to keep attracting new enthusiasts, and the best way to do that is to get people who have even the vaguest curiosity about weaving in front of a loom.

I have about 150 square feet of my basement dedicated to weaving, plus a big corner of my living room where my 50" Norwood sits. Then there's my office where I design, write and communicate with other weavers at the computer. Usually I also have a card table set up in the living room where I work on my tapestry loom.

What are you doing now?

I'm just finishing a 1 ½ year study of boundweave, am taking a tapestry class, and have a rep project on the big loom in an effort to develop a workshop to teach. But with an eye toward the 2008 COE Handweaving examination, everything I do now is directed toward a required sample.

What goals have you set for yourself?

I want to be ready to submit my Level I COE portfolio for the 2008 examination. In the process, I hope to discover what my “specialty” will eventually be. I want to do more teaching, both beginning weaving and technique workshops. I want to do more writing about weaving, fiber crafts and the people who love them.

What do you dream about?

I would love to enroll in the Professional Crafts-Fiber program at Haywood Community College in the North Carolina mountains. I dream of teaching in that program or one of the other great weaving schools near Asheville . And maybe writing a book.