

JC Bradford – Artist, Teacher, Guild Mentor

by Joel Russ, January 4, 2022

*JC's Memorial Photo and
Plaque, hanging in the
Threads Guild Hall
Photo credit Gary Yakimchuk*



In 1980, School District 7 transferred numerous old school properties to the Regional District of Central Kootenay. In '81, the RDCK announced their decision to make these properties available for transfer to community organizations that could make good use of them. JC wanted to pounce on the opportunity! She was able to convince some of her friends, involved with fibre arts, to embrace the idea of forming a non-profit society. The Slocan Valley Threads Guild was quickly organized, and registered under B.C. law. JC negotiated the acquisition of the lot with its one-room school building, just off Highway Six in Perry Siding; the title was transferred to the Guild in October 1981, for the cost of *one* dollar!

Judith Christine Bradford was born in London, England in 1947. While she was still quite young, her family moved to Ontario, and she spent her early youth in Don Mills. Her mother was a quilter, likely setting an example of working creatively with fabric. JC found employment in Expo '67 in Montreal, but soon set out for the Canadian west.

In 1968, she'd made it out to Vancouver, where she joined other young students at the trailblazing craft school Handcraft House, in North Van. This was a vibrant learning centre, independent of either colleges or government. JC would return there in the future too, coming under the tutelage of master weaver Mieneke Mees.

JC became acquainted with the central Kootenay, spending time in Argenta, and before long was meeting people in her age range who were visiting — sometimes beginning to put down roots — in the Slocan Valley. The beautiful vale was forested and relatively intact environmentally. By 1970, there was already the glimmer of a renaissance here. It began to abound with youthful energy, joy, and optimism, becoming a beneficiary of the late-1960s surge of creative and transformational energy. JC expressed that she'd sought a community she could fully participate in and contribute to. She availed herself of an opportunity to make a home on David Orcutt's sylvan communal acreage, above the east banks of Slocan River.

JC fit in well with the young people who continued to pour in: hikers, organic gardeners, school teachers, musicians, artists, carpenters, and others. She impressed everyone as being bright, savvy, outspoken, sometimes sassy. Her reputation for an avid dedication to hand-weaving, and an unquenchable thirst for more practical knowledge about fibre and textiles, spread.

She participated in some of the early '70s Christmas Craft Fairs held out at the newly established Vancouver East Cultural Centre, where JC met Yetta Lees, an organizer of the Fair. Lees, who lived in Victoria, was a consummate hand-weaver who promoted crafts unstintingly and was cofounder of the Circle Craft Co-op (as of now, long-based on Granville Island). That meeting with Lees was auspicious; later, when Lees was provided some Canadian Executive Service Organization economic-development funds, she flew JC out to Victoria. After discussions, Lees offered to allocate some money for JC to pursue outreach to craftspeople back in her home region. She established an outlet for textile-craft supplies on the Orcutt land. Besides increasing her connections with other women interested in fibre arts, the project boosted JC's confidence to initiate community projects.

By the late '70s, a group of young Valley women had been meeting in each other's homes, more or less monthly, to visit while working on their fibre-art projects. Women from this informal and protean group now recall that she was the one who immediately flashed on the evident possibility: collaborate, and become the mortgage-free owners of the available Perry Siding schoolhouse.

So began a Valley institution, an organization that has grown to more than 100 members. The *sine qua non*, its physical meeting place, has served the instructional and social needs of the craftswomen, and served also as a space occasionally used by other groups for meetings and events.

*JC (L) and member Laura Tiberti (R)
at the Threads Guild Hall (2001)
Photo credit Threads Guild archives*



Over several decades, JC led the Guild's board as president. She knew not only techniques of hand-weaving on a floor loom, but also of wool spinning, quilting, inkle weaving, colour design, the rigorous method of indigo dyeing, and the shibori technique; she shared these, as well. "I was inspired by JC's enthusiasm, skill, and practical suggestions," Guild member Jane Murphy said. "Her mentoring nurtured a feeling of self-confidence in my own ideas and abilities." JC is also credited as one of the main idea people behind grant applications for funds to renovate and repair the Guild's building, and in support of certain workshop offerings.



*Happy class participants from Rag Rug workshops,
Photo credits Andrea Bryant (L), Threads Guild archives (R)*

The Guild's members have always been keen to invite skilled and knowledgeable craftspeople to teach classes. Her gregarious nature and eagerness to connect enabled JC to bring in a number of exceptional fibre experts, including her early mentor Mienke Mees (originally teaching at Handcraft House, and afterwards head of the textile-arts program in

Capilano College), and later Katharine Dickerson, head of the textile department in the Alberta College of Art & Design. JC herself taught for a year in a post-secondary textile department, at Kootenay School of the Arts.

For all that, fine craft wasn't the only important facet of JC's life. With a need for paying work stretching over a number of years, she tackled the job of reforestation-camp cook. She was a nature lover who, in the 1980s, organized hikes for neighbourhood girls up to the Slocan Chief Cabin, in Kokanee Glacier Park. JC joined a group of accordianists, determined to learn to play the instrument. She attended meetings of the Slocan Village chapter of the Women's Institute, to share a fresh perspective. JC was a staunch board member of the Slocan Valley Watershed Alliance. She enjoyed staying well-read on contemporary urban culture and progressive politics, and often declaimed the slogan "the personal is political."

In middle age, JC was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. As her health declined, she continued to teach, and her condition catalyzed ideas for practical improvements to the Guild's building. In the mid '90s, she recommended the board approve the addition of a wheelchair ramp to the structure. A decade later, she proposed the washroom be renovated for accessibility, and, as with the ramp initiative, the board procured a grant. JC persevered despite her difficulties, continuing to direct much of her available energy to coordination and teaching. JC was honoured with a lifetime membership in the Guild and, after her passing in 2015, with a wall-mounted picture in the building. In her memory, a walnut tree was planted in the Guild's yard (walnut husks having been the basis for a natural-dyeing method she taught). JC is remembered as a Slocan Valley luminary.



"JC's Tree" in the yard of the Threads Guild, with samples of her work arranged for display by Lesley Mayfield, Photo credit Jeremy Addington