

Brenda Elder: Painting with wool and holding everything together

In 1972, Brenda Elder and her husband Gail came to the Kootenays in a camper van, searching for land. They saw an ad in the Nelson Daily News: farm for sale, with only a reply box number for the paper, no name or address given. They convinced the clerk to reveal the name of the person who placed the ad. On the way to the valley from Nelson, a grateful hitchhiker said, "Talk to Mrs. Jones, she knows where everybody lives." Mrs. Jones was the legendary owner of Jones' Store, now the Winlaw MiniMart, which housed the Post Office. Of course, she knew exactly where the place was, on Avis Road, just north of Perry's bridge.

Brenda and Gail bought the farm and its "historic old log house," allowing Baba Babakieff to stay on until the following spring. In the summer of 1973, farm paid for, they came and took up their life in the Slokan Valley. Fifty years later, they are still here, in the same house, although with the expansion and improvements they have made to it, the original owners would scarcely recognize it.

In 2019 Brenda made a log cabin quilt in celebration of their 50th wedding anniversary, combining her and Gail's favorite colours of blue and green using fabric scraps going back decades.
Photo credit: Jane Murphy



Before too long, they became a family, with son Krispen's birth in 1975, followed by daughter Elena in 1978. Meanwhile they were figuring out how to keep body and soul together, working at various jobs, as well as trying to be self-sufficient by gardening and farming. Briefly they tried raising and selling shelties, but that didn't work out. Both were educators and worked as substitute teachers. Brenda worked at the Appledale Daycare, where she became friends with many of the parents who eventually became part of her fibre family. Gail eventually went back to teaching, at first part-time, and then full-time.

When Krispen enrolled in kindergarten in 1980, Brenda wanted to do more to help support the family financially. In 1981 she started "in a very small way" and built her first greenhouse. This enterprise gradually developed into a well-respected operation, Elderbee Greens. Brenda ran this business, with heartfelt dedication, for over 30 years. She finally retired in 2011, selling the business to Eliza Gooderham (Hamsa) and Pete Slevin. Just up the road, they now operate as Bee Greens.

In 1981, the School Board decommissioned the old school buildings in the area and gave them to the RDCK, who offered them to community groups for a nominal sum (\$1). The building which now houses the Threads Guild was one of these buildings.

JC Bradford, who lived on the World Sign land on Perry's Hill and was a fabric artist of considerable dedication and talent, got right on to pursuing this opportunity. Brenda remembers sitting on the porch of the Guild with JC editing a letter (full of weaving metaphors) proposing the building should become the Threads Guild. Bob Cunningham, another legendary Valley figure, was the School Board

Trustee at the time. He was invaluable in assisting this proposal to go forward.

"I've always been interested in fibre arts. When I was in high school, I made clothes, and at University I took up batik and macrame. My mother was a seamstress and a knitter whose artistic pursuits included weaving, watercolours, pottery and clay sculpture." Like her mother, she says, "I am a maker." She thinks of this as applying to her work with gardening and plants as well as with fibre. With the SV Guild so close by it was natural to stay involved.



For the first two decades at the Guild raffle quilts were the main source of fundraising. Brenda contributed to the creation of each of them. Brenda and Susan Mackintosh look on as a child pulls the winning ticket for the 1987 'Valley Scenes' quilt. Photo credit: Threads Guild Archives

JC Bradford's mother was involved in arts organizations in Ontario, and the model for the Yard and Yardage Fundraising sale was initiated there. JC picked up on the idea and Y&Y was first held in 2001, becoming an annual event. The sale of fabric and plants depends on community

donations for its success to raise money for the Guild. A showcase of some of the beautiful things members created plus a great spread of delicious food helped bring in regular crowds. Thus, the now famous Yard and Yardage (Y&Y) sale was born. Because of her business and her love of plants, Brenda's involvement in the "Yard" part of the sale was key to its becoming a big feature of the day.

Many folks flock to the sale as much for the plants as for the fabric. Her involvement went far beyond gathering and selling plants, however. "Brenda has been the coordinator of this event for many years," says Lois Bresascin Lawrence. "She absolutely takes on responsibility for that role."

Brenda says the main reason the Guild needs to raise money is "The building needs constant maintenance and improvement."

Through the Guild's fundraising efforts and locally available grants the members have been able to improve and renovate the building during its 42-year occupancy.



Brenda and Joanne Feenstra preparing for the plant sale portion of Yard and Yardage, April 2022. Photo credit: Jane Murphy

“There's always something coming along,” Brenda says. Information about funding and improvements are in the article on this website discussing the building.

Some money does come in from classes. The Guild pays teachers a good wage, wanting to be respectful of what it takes to be a teacher. Nonetheless, compared to learning opportunities elsewhere, the classes are remarkably inexpensive. “We try to serve the people,” Brenda says.

At one time, she says, “There was so much going on with improving the building, regular activities were 'kiboshed' for a while. Now they have come back stronger than ever.”

While all the building renos were going on, JC's health was deteriorating. As a result, the Guild also had to regroup, as she had been the main driving force up until that time. She passed in March of 2015.

Once the upgrading was finished the organization was very active from 2015 until spring 2020. Membership rose to about 100 in response to regular newsletters and many activities. Then the pandemic hit, and things slowed down considerably. Y&Y was put on hold for two and a half years. Brenda says this was a strange time for her and many other members, because the Guild had become such an important part of their lives, a sort of extended family.

It became imperative to get Y&Y going again, not only because the members and the public missed it, but also because such a backlog of material and related items had been gathered, and all that stuff really needed to get out to the public. Brenda says in some ways, it feels as if with Y&Y, “We have created a monster.”

“It is a lot of work to organize, price and store everything. We get donations from far and wide.” It is a wonderful recycling fundraiser and very popular in the community, she says.

Not only is the Guild an important opportunity for social connection, it is a place where members can pick up a wide range of skills. Brenda tried most of them, although she never ventured into weaving and spinning.

In the 1990s, she had taken a picture of a spectacular growth of turkey tail fungus, and for years she tried to figure out how to “paint” them with fabric. She tried various media, including silk painting, but nothing delivered what she wanted. Then she took a rug punching class from Sara Judith. This was it. She had found her passion. “I am so grateful to Sara Judith for bringing rug punching to the Guild,” she says. “In 2011 at the first workshop, the potential for 'painting with wool' became clear to me. The turkey tail image became my first rug, the following year.”

“I'm still hooked.”



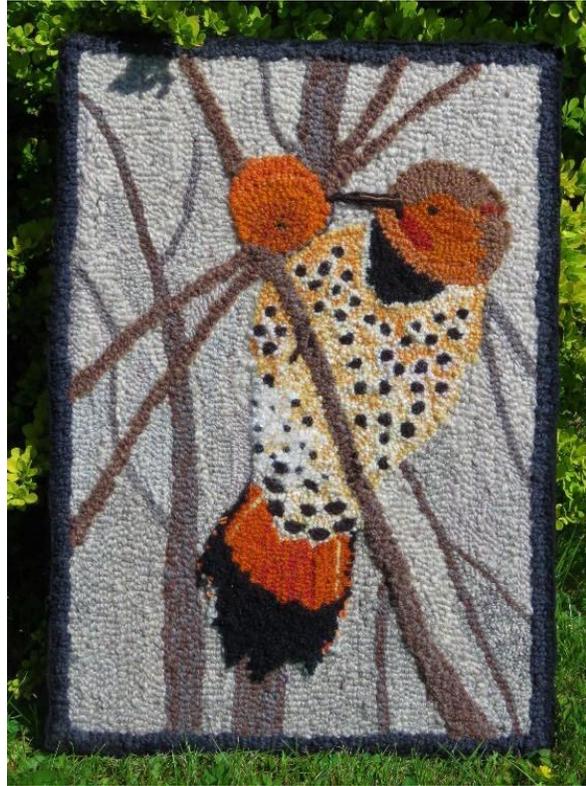
*Turkey Tail Fungus punch hooked rug, 2012.
Photo credit: Jane Murphy*

The result is astounding. She has also produced many other impressive art pieces in this style, but this one is her pièce de résistance.

She has been improving her punching techniques for over a decade and has learned a great deal since the days when she was producing “innumerable seat pads.” One interesting development was learning how to add “dimensionality” to the pieces and turn them into almost three-dimensional art. “I don't know where it will go,” she says. “I never thought about selling or anything. I make these things for other people as gifts, and for me.”

Rug punching has been a regular pursuit, all her own designs, using pictures as models. “Other than that, I knit, and I make quilts. I stopped knitting when my family was young, but I took it up again 15 years ago.”

Originally the Guild was mostly drawn from the social group, mainly urban refugees, who came here in the 1970s. Now, she says, there is a changeover, younger women are coming in, and the Guild is consciously trying to attract them.



Flicker with apple, rug punched wall hanging 2023. Loops facing front or back create dimensionality. Photo credit: Jane Murphy

What makes the Guild attractive to many is that it is “pretty non-political and wide-ranging.” The Guild is all about fibre arts. This is probably due, she says, to JC's original presence and the ongoing continuation of her vision.

“I've given back to the Guild,” says Brenda, “but the Guild has given so much back to me. Even though it's a lot of work, it is social, and it is fun, and it contributes to something we all care about ~ the continuation of the Guild. And when you come into the building, you hear the hum and buzz of women having so much fun doing all this together. It is a totally supportive situation.”

She quotes one woman who came from New Denver, “People find something they didn't know they had.”

“I don't do this all the time,” she says, “I craft in the winter because in the summer I am gardening. My son and his family live across the road from us and we feed ourselves to a large extent from our own gardens. In the summer I get my jollies from flowers.”

For the last ten years, Brenda has been the Secretary of the Guild and doing the behind-the-scenes work that weaves the whole thing together. She is eternally grateful her love for the fibre arts has contributed so much to her having a life rich in beauty and purpose. “I don't know what I would have done without the Guild,” she says. “It is an essential part of my life.”