

Putney Post

Winter 2008





Cover Artist: Melissa Johnson '77

By Don Cuerdon

Like so many people who do interesting work, Melissa Johnson's path to teaching weaving as an academic discipline at The Putney School wasn't exactly a straight line—nor was she a willing volunteer. During a visit to the weaving studio loft in the Reynolds Building, jam-packed with looms and other fiber arts tools, Melissa told us about that journey and the status of weaving at Putney today:

I took weaving as a winter evening activity with Libby Mills when I was 14 and instantly fell in love with it. Weaving gave me a focus and identity and ultimately changed the course of my life. After 33 years as a weaver, I still think it's great fun and am discovering new and exciting techniques to try on my own or with my fiber arts students.

After Libby retired from Putney, they were having trouble keeping a weaving teacher in place. [Assistant Director] Hugh Silbaugh called me up during the winter of '94-'95 when the teacher had quit mid-year. I was doing custom weaving and design for The Green Mountain Spinnery in Putney and my daughter Phoebe (now a freshman here) was two years old.

There was no way I felt I could take the job, so I turned it down. A few days later, [Director] Sven Huseby called me back and said that if I didn't accept the position all

that Libby had done for the program would be lost and weaving at Putney would die out. Of course I couldn't let that happen. I took the job.

In the twelve years that I have been teaching, the program has grown in many ways. It is now offered both semesters and for the six weeks of the summer program. We have received an amazing

their yarns and work with very fine threads in complex eight-harness patterns, often of their own design.

We have a computer program that helps with the design process.

You can type in a threading, treadling and tie up and then see what both sides of the fabric would look like in any combination of colors you choose.



number of gifts from parents, alums and friends including four- and eight-harness looms, spinning wheels, sewing machines, a serger, lots of yarn and fabric and a flock of prize-winning Merino, Romney and Border Lester sheep.

An increasing number of students are starting with fleece right off the sheep, then dyeing it with dye plants from our garden, spinning the yarn and weaving or knitting with it. Students have done exhibitions and project weeks that combine science, math, chemistry, music and poetry with weaving. Many hand dye



The weaving room is a bright, colorful, crowded haven where something is nearly always happening—whether it is mending jeans with donated batik fabric, designing a fabulous silk couture collection of dresses or weaving a blanket of wool yarns from Putney's sheep.

Come visit!