

My Quilting Bio
Pamela St. John Zurer

As I approach my 71st birthday, I'm astounded to calculate that I've lived almost five times as long on the East Coast as I did in California where I was born and grew up. As a senior at Berkeley High School, I took Greek at UC Berkeley through a special program. When it came time to go to college, I had a choice of continuing at Cal or enrolling at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia as a Classics major. As a rebellious teenager, I wanted to get as far from home as possible, so Swarthmore it was.

To satisfy a breadth requirement, my first year I took chemistry, which I'd never studied before. That course was life-changing: The charming guy at the lab bench behind me was Burt Zurer, now my husband of 50 years. I also ended up switching to a chemistry major and eventually obtained a Ph.D. in organic chemistry from Johns Hopkins. That's where I became friends with June Bronfenbrenner, who worked in the lab next to mine and later would inspire me to learn to quilt. Another quilting inspiration has been Diana Zurer, who's married to my husband's brother Jim.

When I started grad school I figured I would return to the pharmaceutical industry where I'd worked right out of college. But after many years in the lab I began to look for a career where I could keep up with science but not actually do it myself. As I was completing my degree, I won a fellowship from the American Association of Advancement for Science (AAAS) to spend a summer as a journalist. The goal of AAAS's Mass Media Science & Engineering Fellowship is to develop scientists who can comfortably communicate complex issues to the public. But like many other former fellows, I ended up leaving the lab to join a news room.

My fellowship summer at the Providence, R.I., Journal-Bulletin gave me a folder of clips with which to go job hunting. I began working in D.C. for Chemical & Engineering News, the weekly news magazine of the American Chemical Society, two days after my dissertation defense. When I started there Burt and I were living in Baltimore not far from Hopkins and commuting to our jobs in D.C. We moved to our home in Silver Spring in 1982 just months before our daughter Rachel was born.

Growing up, my mother sewed clothes for my sisters and me, often making matching outfits. She taught me the rudiments of sewing and I learned more in home economics in junior high. I stopped making clothes for myself after too many instances when I'd put on the finished product and find it either didn't fit well or was unflattering. When Rachel was small I occasionally made clothes for her that were more successful, as little ones' bodies are easier to fit. When she was in junior high she and I took a Quilt-in-a-Day course at G St., each making a Trip-Around-the-World baby quilt. The knowledgeable sales folks at G St. helped us pick our fabrics and introduced us to rotary cutters, rulers, and mats. What a revelation! I made a few quilts after that first one, but didn't really get into it until after I retired.

Another revelation was the world of quilt shows. About 20 years ago June invited me to join friends of hers, many from the Annapolis Quilt Guild, at the Mid-Atlantic Quilt Festival. It's been fun and inspiring to see the various quilts and to shop the vendors' wide range of fabrics, threads, and notions. The group has traditionally made a weekend of it, revisiting our favorite restaurants. Our last trip was in the end of February 2020, just before the pandemic hit. I hope we'll be able to make it back in 2022.

My sister-in-law Diana brought me into NeedleChasers in 2014. That year she and I were in charge of volunteers for the quilt show, excellent exposure that readied us to cochair the 2016 show. I have loved seeing our members' quilt at our shows and meetings and the wide variety of speakers and workshops. The guild has also given me a chance to learn new skills beyond those of quilting. Serving as Webmaster I learned how to manage a website, and now as Treasurer I'm wrassling QuickBooks.

In my own work, I find I get a bit bored working from a pattern, no matter how much I like it. I much prefer to figure out my own designs. The same goes for quilting the sandwiches. I have a small long arm that I could use to quilt edge-to-edge designs, but I like to custom quilt my pieces. I keep the designs simple as that's all my expertise allows.

I've enjoyed having my work hang at the Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show (SOQS) in Oregon a few times, and the town and the show have become intimately entwined in my life. When my sister Winnie St. John and her husband Jeff Omodt moved to Eugene, Oregon, in 2007, I suggested we make a day trip to see this famous outdoor show I'd heard about. To make a long story short, they loved the town so much they ended up first buying a second home there and then moving to Sisters permanently. It's been wonderful being able to combine visiting them and volunteering at the show most years. Jeff got hooked on quilting through courses at the Stitching Post and became, first, treasurer of SOQS and now chair of its Board of Directors. The show was virtual in 2020 but was back in July 2021 at a somewhat smaller scale. A highlight this year for Jeff and me was a special exhibit of quilts in memory of Winnie, who died in December.

I'm currently quilting a large baby quilt for a new mom who recently had twins. And I'm collecting the fabrics to take to a retreat where I'll make a "Shards" quilt, using Donna Radner's scheme as taught to us a few years ago by Debbie Lamb-Mechanick. After that I'll see what our daughter might like for her new home in Colorado.