

Digital Delays

This is one of those good news, bad news stories. The good news is that we have finally replaced our ancient, inflexible database system with a snazzy new program, custom-modified for the needs of our registration and mailing list system. The bad news is that take-off was pretty rocky, and 1998 registration was a major migraine.

Anyone who has ever done this can probably imagine the story. The new database required new network software, which needed a new server, which, we discovered later, required faster terminals. There were all sorts of delays including an ill-timed four-day power outage—the result of a tree-breaking winter storm—and the new system was in place for only a week before registration began. Things looked fine, but with a record number of first-day applications and all the terminals going at once, the system slowed first to a crawl, then to a snail's pace. Then it crashed.

Things take longer out in the country, and it was two weeks before the system was limping along again. It wasn't a simple problem, but the root cause was too many major components replaced at once without enough time for comprehensive testing. The staff continued to take registration on paper, but it was months before they were caught up and could produce accurate bills, records, etc.

In the middle of all this, trying to keep her cool, was Penland's new registrar, Lisa Grindstaff. Lisa, who grew up in Mitchell County, came to work at Penland in 1992 as the school secretary. She has an amazing ability to be kind and cheerful to the public no matter what is going on. But after five years of being tied to the telephone, she was ready for a challenge and she got one as Penland's new registrar. Penland still relies on Lisa's good nature, however, and never more so than this spring, when she was constantly called upon to apologize and deal gracefully with a messy situation. "Actually, people have not been as upset as I thought they were going to be," she said. "Anyone who has to deal with computers knows what it's like to put in a new system, and most everyone has been understanding."

Lisa and others have been working closely with the computer people to iron out one glitch after another and most things are now working properly. "It's down to fine tuning now, and it's not depressing to come to work anymore. It's really a good system with a lot of capability we didn't have before."

So we hope that your bill was correct and you got the right refund and one of the classes you wanted, but if not, we'll do our best to straighten things out, and we'll try to make sure that we have smooth sailing in 1999. (Yes, the new system can handle the year 2000.)



Gardener Priscilla Johnson and registrar Lisa Grindstaff drawing names for the first-day registration lottery. A record thirty-three classes filled on the first day this year.



Robin Dreyer

Stacy Twesten loading an enameling kiln.

Stacy has a BFA from Southwest Missouri State University. She does excellent work and was requested as an assistant by Sarah Perkins. This was a welcome opportunity, as Stacy had been thinking about Penland for a while. "I volunteer for Repair Days at the National Ornamental Metals Museum," she explained. "I met Elizabeth Brim and other folks from Penland there. They kept telling me that I was a Penland person and that I needed to come here." Then she smiled and added, "I hope I live up to the standard."

As far as accessibility is concerned, Stacy said that the biggest issue for her was the school making it possible for Kevin to come with her. "That's made things ninety-eight percent workable," she said. Kevin drove her around in the school's golf cart, and helped her negotiate hard stuff like the food line or getting to the coffee house by carrying her. He is also a knowledgeable metalsmith, so his presence has been a bonus for the class as well.

Although she had to explain it a couple of times before it sunk in, Stacy's point about access was simple. Access means doing whatever is necessary, and that is different for each person. "Disability standards—that's a bit of an oxymoron, isn't it?" she said. "What is difficult or easy for me may be different for you; maybe you're living with a bad back or something that's not so visible." When I asked what we should be doing to improve things, she came back to this point. "I have a little list which I will discuss with the director, but these things are only my opinion based on my situation. And then, I don't require things to be perfect. I'm happy to nail a board in place and call it a ramp. I'd also like to mention that the assistantships, work/study, and scholarships are incredibly important. I wouldn't be able to come here otherwise."

While I was deeply impressed by Stacy's determination not to be handicapped by her environment, after spending a little time with her in the studio (where her physical irregularities seemed to go completely unnoticed), my strongest impression was that Penland had found another excellent studio assistant.

While Stacy was at Penland she stayed at Arbor House, which was built in 1994 as a first step towards improving Penland's accessibility. Access is one of the elements which will be studied as part of the campus master plan. Leslie Young, of the Center for Universal Design at N.C. State, and disability activist Joy Weeber will be consulting with the school on this aspect of the plan. —Robin Dreyer

Raleigh Report

A breakfast conversation between Penland Trustee Bobby Kadis and State Senator John Kerr of Goldsboro took me back to Raleigh within days of beginning my new job at Penland. What started as a chat about Penland's needs turned, within a few weeks, into a proposal for a special appropriation of two million dollars in support of construction and renovation at the school.

So while I was unpacking boxes before starting to work, Erika Sanger, our director of development, was drafting materials on Penland's historic contributions to the state, our economic impact on the region, and Penland's service to artists and students throughout North Carolina. Then, during my first week, Erika and I traveled to the capitol to present the case to our legislators.

Guided by advice from Bobby and Senator Kerr, we met with our senators, John Garwood and Kenneth Moore, and our representatives, Monroe Buchanan and Gregg Thompson. They asked tough questions and, in the end, wholeheartedly supported our request that they introduce a bill on Penland's behalf.

We talked to them about the national resurgence of interest in iron, the high demand for these classes, and the inadequacy of the current iron facility. We explained our desire to move the letterpress studio from Horner Hall, at the edge of the school, to a new location adjacent to the paper and book studio, a move which will free up space in Horner for a display of Penland's archives and craft collections.

Our materials also showed the historic structures at Penland and described the need for restoration. The Dye Shed (c. 1840), Dora's Place (1890), the second floor of Ridgeway (1914), Morgan Hall (1917), the Weaving Cabin (1926), the Sanford Center Barns (c. 1930), the Craft House (1935), Radcliffe (1938), and the Pines (1940) all face serious and timely restoration needs.

Our current estimate for renovation and new construction based on initial staff research and consultant reports is \$4.5 million, which led us to our request for \$2 million from the legislature. The budget process, of course, is complex and political, and we know that this request may only be the beginning of an ongoing interaction between Penland and the state government. However, the process was educational for everyone involved and, at very least, will give us new visibility in Raleigh.

It was also an opportunity for us to make friends with our legislators and help them understand what an asset Penland is to their region. We were warmly welcomed by all and were reminded of how important it is for constituents to visit their representatives and provide them with information about the life of the state. —Jean McLaughlin