

# Penland Line

PENLAND SCHOOL OF CRAFTS • POST OFFICE BOX 37 • PENLAND • NORTH CAROLINA • 28765-0037 • FALL 2000

## The Corps at Penland's Core

It's changeover Saturday at Penland School. One hundred and fifty people left yesterday and 150 more are showing up tomorrow. The crowd of people here right now are work/study students and studio assistants who have one day to get the campus ready for the next summer session. We better assign tasks and crews to some people who know what needs to be done.

So here comes Brian in the big red truck with a load of cardboard, bottles, and cans. There go Rebecca, Darryl, and Laurencia, each with a crew off to a different building to clean and make up all the rooms. Zack and John are driving back and forth to the airport, shuttling students. Meredith is supervising a dining hall makeover, while Ronan, Eleanor, and Benares are in the kitchen making lunch for the whole crew.

Who are these people running this operation? Well, they're not exactly staff, although they have jobs at the school. They're students, scholarship students, but with a lot of responsibility. They are, of course, the Penland core students, so called because

they hold core jobs at the school—they help make things run on a fundamental level. But the title could be taken to have a deeper meaning.

When the current class of core students made a presentation to the board of trustees last April, it was not just their art work that was impressive. They each told the story of their relationship with Penland School and how they got here. Zack Noble, for example, was working in a production blacksmith shop and wanted a stronger grounding in the craft. Ronan Peterson grew up in Mitchell County but didn't really know about Penland until he went away to college. Meredith Brickell is a graphic designer, but her real love is ceramics. Benares Finan-Eshelman is preschool teacher who wanted to explore making. And glassblower Brian Barber wanted some intensive studio time before going on to graduate school.

These stories epitomized the many paths that lead people to this school. As they described their experience here, it was clear that the quality of their work, their interest in ideas, their passion, and their commitment to the community were expressions of the values that are at the core of Penland.

The program was founded in 1970 by Penland's second director, Bill Brown. He and his wife Jane were looking for a way to keep up with the workload created by Penland's growing program and they were interested in expanding opportunities for scholarship students. Out of these interests came the core program. "The answer had unfolded," Jane wrote last year, "the core students could stay long enough to form and redirect their lives as they became an integral part of a thriving creative community—to give and to receive."

Core students spend two years at Penland in what is often described as a work exchange program—part-time work for the school is exchanged for room, board, and tuition. While

this work is an important reciprocation to the school, a conversation with the current group of core students made it clear that their jobs are part of the learning. As they spoke about the obvious benefits of the program—access to classes, the opportunity to work in different media—there were also frequent references to learning management skills, cooking skills, leadership skills, and the skills of community living.

Potter and Penland Trustee Jon Ellenbogen was a core student in the early seventies. He describes his experience this

way: "Besides learning something about clay and pottery from many of the country's best potters, I learned how to cook six turkeys and get them carved and served on time and how to scramble 360 eggs. I also learned how to work with, and get along with many different kinds of people (and some of them were extremely different, indeed)."

This is not to diminish the fact that core students come to Penland for an education in craft, and as such, it's an unparalleled opportunity—we know of no similar program

anywhere. Core students take five classes in the summer, picking from the ninety-eight that are offered, and they take an eight-week Concentration each spring and fall. They live at Penland year-round and work independently in the off-season.

Some core students, like jeweler John Andrew, come with a strong area of interest and primarily take classes in that studio. Others, like Eleanor Gould, come to Penland intending to work in many studios, exploring a broad range of techniques and media. Then there are students like Andi Steele who came with a strong interest in one area (in her case, papermaking) and left devoted to another (iron and sculpture).

The beauty of the program is that all of these options are available and are encouraged. Teaching is also a part of the experience: core students help work/study students get up to speed in a number of jobs, and they have the opportunity to teach in a kid's camp they run in the summer.

Former core student Ila Prouty gave this description of her time at Penland: "I first went looking for Penland because I wanted to get at the things that were off my radar—the things I couldn't even imagine I needed to know, but was sure would help me teach and think and live on a broader, deeper scale.

"That core student recipe of working to run the day-to-day, of making things, of teaching and learning, percolated together into what is now the well-stewed muck of my own creativity. This percolation changed the way I think about everything. It is a very elegant recipe: work, make, teach, learn."

It requires a special person to take on eight housemates and jobs that several hundred people are counting on while also engaging in the intense atmosphere of Penland classes. Assistant Director Geraldine Plato, who has supervised the program for a number of years, says of the core students: "They tend to be the kind of people you can hand things to and they will exceed your expectations."

One thing that core students have never had is dedicated studio space. In summer, they move from class to class, in winter they settle into various studios that have heat, and stray bits of unused space get claimed from time to time. But most core students would benefit from the continuity of a workspace they could call their own.

Ila returned to her kitchen metaphor to describe this need: "Occasionally what a core student needs is to climb up the ladle and out of the stew, to get a better vantage point, to sort out and knit together. For me, a small corner of Ridgeway was this vantage point. I escaped there to a table outside the vortex of classes and excitement and new learning to a place where continuity existed. My tools lay where I put them, and my ideas (usually scrawled on a napkin) waited for me, reminded me."

This need will be addressed as part of the final phase of renovating the Ridgeway Building. The second floor of Ridgeway (now an unfinished attic) will be expanded with dormers and converted into a large open studio space. The core studio portion of the renovation has a budget of \$100,000; fundraising is underway. When complete, it will provide core students with that place of continuity.

The benefits of the program, both to the students and the school, continue long after their two years are over. "You can't live here for that long and not get this place in your blood," says Geraldine. A number of core students have later become resident artists; more than a few have settled in the area; and there are currently seven former core students on staff. Many return as students and studio assistants and, as their careers grow, many are invited back as instructors.

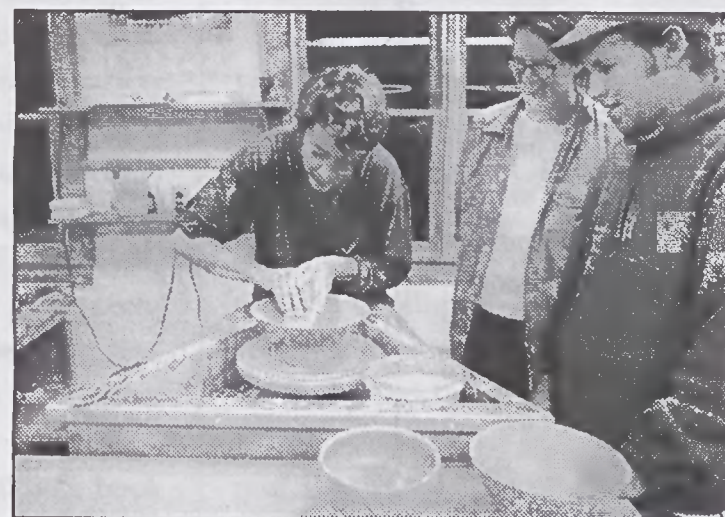
A measure of the program's success is the number of core students who have gone on to make a life in the crafts. Since its inception, about 150 people have participated in the program. When the gallery was planning a core program retrospective show last year, we identified about 100 who are still working as craftspeople. But whether the skills and knowledge offered by the program

are applied to work in the arts or to some other pursuit, it seems likely that every core student's life will be strongly affected by their time at Penland.

Core student Laurencia Strauss summarized in a surprising way. "I keep feeling like Penland itself, the whole place, is a big ongoing art project and we are experiencing it while helping to create it." —Robin Dreyer



Core 2000 (left to right): back row: Rebecca Carter, Eleanor Gould, Meredith Brickell, Benares Finan-Eshelman, Zack Noble; front row: Laurencia Strauss, John Andrew, Darryl Maleike, Brian Barber, Ronan Peterson.



Many former core students have joined the roster of Penland instructors. Jane Shellenbarger, who is teaching the spring clay concentration, was a core student in 1987-89. In her class are core students Meredith Brickell and Ronan Peterson.