

Good Friends

HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION



Robin Dreyer

I began my summer at Penland by teaching a two-week session which ended on June 20. Knowing that I would be on sabbatical this year, I volunteered to stay and help out with whatever needed to be done. As a board member, I knew that Donna Jean was working more time than she had agreed to as Interim Director and that the rest of the staff were working at capacity and then some. It was agreed that I should take over the social responsibilities for each session, be on call for emergencies in the evening, and fill in elsewhere as needed.

So I became a member of the staff. We got to eat fifteen minutes before everyone else and this really helped develop a feeling of being part of a team, as we sat together in groups eating and talking.

I had never been here during changeover weekend—the 30 hours between the end of one session and the beginning of the next—and I had no idea what that meant. On Saturday morning the new work/study students meet with Robert Chiarito and the

Core students, and at 9:30 the doors of the Pines fly open and out comes a herd of people who jump into pickups and go off in all directions to strip, clean, polish, and make beds for the new session. It is an exciting, energetic day as the stage is set for another group of students to have the Penland experience.

I answered phones in the office, worked with Erika Sanger on fundraising projects, helped host openings at the Gallery, cleaned out a few places that used to belong to mice, cleaned some of the textiles in the archives, drove an instructor to the hospital, had lots of parties for faculty and donors, and thoroughly enjoyed myself. The auction was an even bigger treat. To be behind the scenes and see the energy and work ethic displayed by everyone involved was amazing, exciting, and so worthwhile.

The Penland puzzle has taken on more of a complete image for me after spending the summer working with the staff and community and developing stronger relationships in this village. Each session was filled with hard work, laughter, enlightenment, and transformation. I was impressed with the quality of the work at each Show and Tell. And so many times I was filled with joy as I watched yet another Penland moment take place.

I first came here to teach in 1968 at the age of 27 and each time I return I am transformed yet again. It has always been a place of centering for me. I am grateful for being allowed this time here and will never forget how I spent one of the best summers of my life. —Janet Taylor ✨

JOHN NEFF, 1971-1997

“John was a master of giving gifts. He made teabowls and drawings and sculptures and would give them away or trade them or sell them for a few dollars. I believe that this was his way of showing his love for the gift he had received—making his own work, living in the world, living at Penland, meeting other people who saw something of the world he saw. He felt that he had received a gift of seeing and making things, and struggled to bring it into the world. The responsibility of this was sometimes paralyzing to him, sometimes enthralling. The struggle did get to him. But what is important is that he was engaged in the struggle.” These words are from a letter sent by former Core student **IlaSahai Prouty**, writing about her partner, our friend **John Neff**, who was in the Core program from 1994 to 1996.

One of the bright lights went out this summer when John died of a drug overdose. He was often troubled, sometimes irresponsible, and deeply loved. His gift as an artist was such that a Penland teacher once said, “John needs art the way the rest of us need air.”

John was the son of former Penland Resident **Jack Neff**. He grew up in Mitchell County and graduated from Mitchell High School. After attending art school at East Carolina for three years he came home to take care of Jack during the final stages of terminal cancer. Not only did John provide his father with the tenderest of care, he allowed him to die at home—the blessing Jack wanted most. Others who helped with Jack’s care stood in awe of the gift that John gave him.

John left Penland in 1996 and moved to Portland, Oregon. His plan was to enroll at the University of Oregon and study with clay sculptor **George Kokis**, who was one of his teachers at Penland. “I, like so many,” said George, “thought he was exquisitely gifted. And that makes the tragedy come right to the front—that it will never be realized. He had a kind of natural facileness; he could give form to what he felt. It just flowed from him, as though he had a direct line to the mystery.”

John is survived by his mother, Karol Neff and his sister, Claire. —Robin Dreyer ✨

Such was the impact of John’s life that his friends and admirers have contributed generously—not just cash but beautiful work sold at auctions this summer—to a new Penland scholarship which will bear his name. The hope is to raise enough money to make this a full scholarship which will go each year to a student who shares John’s gift. Contributions can be directed to the John Neff Fund, c/o Penland School of Crafts.



Candace Freeland

JANE KESSLER, 1946-1997

Penland lost a special friend on June 5 when **Jane Kessler** was killed in an automobile accident. Jane was a former board member, a donor, and a perpetual supporter of the school. She was instrumental in the development of Penland’s benefit auction; for many years she curated the auction exhibition and her husband, **Fred Kessler**, serves as auctioneer. Jane and Fred brought a combination of professionalism and good humor that set the tone for that event.

During her career, she was curator of contemporary art at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, an independent curator, a historian, and an elegant writer. In all of her work she was an advocate for the artist, particularly the craft artist.

Because of her close association with former Trustee **Harvey Littleton**, we asked him to talk about his friend Jane. He explained that she curated the first major show of his work in the Southeast, and she secured a grant which brought the first artists to his studio to explore printmaking from glass plates. At the time of her death, she was beginning to work on Harvey’s biography.

“Jane was not a tough person,” he said, “she was very sweet. She had a spritelike quality, and she believed, I think, that everybody else was as good and as well meaning as she was. She had a close relationship with our studio. Her friendship was never a burden—it was a delightful thing.

“She helped start the glass collection at the Mint and this is now resulting in a whole new museum dedicated to the crafts. I think it was really Jane’s constant attention to the crafts that focused the museum in this direction.

“Jane was not forceful or aggressive, but you’d often find out, after something happened, that she was behind it. She encouraged people all along the way. She didn’t want glory for herself, she wanted to help other people. She drew people in and then gave them a leadership role.”

Writing in *American Craft*, Jan Brooks echoed this sentiment: “Always open to inquiry, Jane led a life of deep curiosity, her own creative expression realized through countless projects that sought to bring recognition to the voices of artists who she believed spoke to the values of love, compassion, sensitivity and fragility—all values which she exemplified during her life.” ✨

Special thanks to Jane’s friends who made memorial gifts to Penland.