

Jean McLaughlin: Penland's Sixth Director

"I've been thinking about how the connection of people to people is really one of my guiding principles. In all the years that I worked at the Arts Council it seems that that's what I did the most. Somebody would call in, they would tell me a story, they would tell me what they were working on and you'd never believe it, but the next week somebody else would call in and they needed to be connected to this person over here. So that's sort of how I've been connecting people for fifteen or twenty years."

Jean McLaughlin, Penland's sixth director, comes to the school after an extraordinary fifteen-year tenure with the North Carolina Arts Council. During that time, she administered a broad range of visual art programs, was director of public art, and, most recently, headed a new division of the council which worked to promote all of the arts throughout the state and fostered dialogue between institutions from different disciplines.

According to the council's executive director Mary Regan, Jean's role was larger than any of her titles. "Jean has been the engine that's been driving the arts council to move into areas where we were lacking," she said. "She has very high ideals, and in many ways she has been the conscience of the arts council."

Her route into this kind of work, however, was not through an arts administration program, which didn't exist twenty years ago; it was through the studio. Her first degree, from the University of North Carolina, was in studio art (she later completed a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies at N.C. State). "I got into the studio program not so much because I wanted to be an artist, but because I wanted to understand art from the inside out," she explained.

"I came to the making of art from a broader interest in civic purpose and how a person functions in society. I began to see that art was not a single discipline, but that whatever it

is you are trying to say, you are going to say that best if you draw upon all the life experiences that are meaningful to you. Through the making of art I learned to think a lot more about myself. I learned about the

processes, but I also learned what artists need. So when I got involved in arts management, I advocated for artists' needs."

One of the ways she did this was through a series of meetings which brought artists together to talk about what kind of support they needed. Later on, when she was working in the public art program, she had similar meetings aimed at helping artists understand how to propose and execute major works of public art. She also brought gallery owners and curators together with artists of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to increase understanding and awareness of the work coming from these communities.

During her arts council years, she made a number of visits to Penland with the panel which makes decisions about major

organization grants. Her network of friends and colleagues includes dozens of artists associated with the school.

When the director's job became available last year, she decided that Penland would be a challenging and broadening place to spend the next period of her life. In her letter of application she wrote, "There is no other nonprofit educational organization that I believe in more strongly than Penland. Penland is a literal and symbolic refuge. It deserves strong leadership." The rather grueling inter-



Robin Dreyer

view process involved the search committee, other board members, the staff, and the community. In the end, the board decided that Jean was the person who could provide that leadership.

Jean and her husband, ceramic sculptor Tom Spleth, arrived in early May. Jean began work on May 18 with a first priority of getting to know the staff, the facility, the budget, and the community. "Getting oriented is the first thing I need to do," she said, "with an operation and staff of this size, that's going to take more than a day or two." And of course, summer has started so there are classes to visit, instructors to meet, and day-to-day problems to solve.

A priority that lies just behind her information gathering, however, is the development of a strategic plan. "I'm proposing a two-year plan which the staff and board will be instrumental in developing. We'll have the community advise us as well," she explained.

"The plan will not just have goals and objectives, but specific action steps that feed into each individual staff member's work plan so that we can measure whether we've accomplished what we needed to do that year. Of course it has to be flexible, but basically we will know what we hope to accomplish so that we can all move forward together."

Another part of the process, and a huge part, will be a campus master plan which will start from the ground up. "We are talking to Abie Harris who just retired as the campus architect at N.C. State and is considered the master of master

plans. He described a series of maps that any institution needs to have in order to plan—for water runoff, for traffic patterns, for light, safety, accessibility, and certainly a critical issue is the aesthetics of the campus. What should future growth look like? What do we, as the stewards of this place, need to consider when we make decisions?

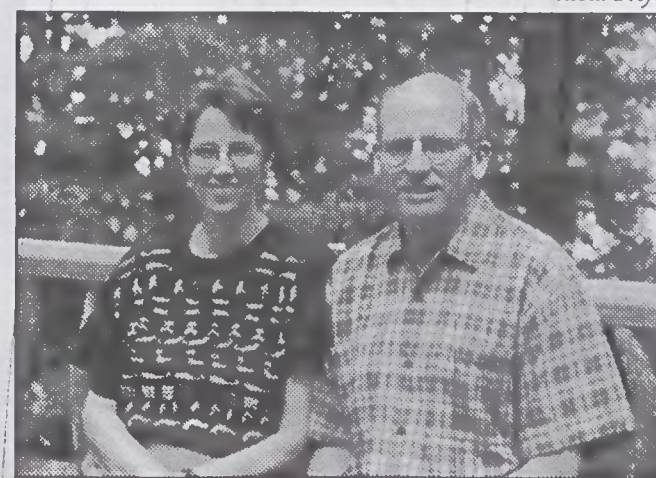
"Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts], for instance, was designed by one person, Edward Larrabee Barnes, so decisions there are going to be guided by following the integrity of his initial premises. At Penland the architecture has a different spirit and greater complexity so we need to identify and characterize what this place is like, and what we want future building to be. We also need to think about sacred places. There are places here that we aren't going to want to touch. We need to identify those places and think about what they mean and how we are going to care for them."

As passionate as she is about this process, however, Jean made it clear that it's not an end in itself. "The central thing is to nurture and continue all the incredible programming that's here," she said. "To nurture the people and the opportunities they have when they come here. We can't ever lose sight of the intense, magical experience of Penland."

When asked about the director's role in charting a course for the school, she spoke with an awareness of Penland's history, and her answer reflected, once again, her penchant for bringing people together. "I think that Penland is larger than any of us—certainly larger than me. There are so many people who care passionately about Penland, and I want to make sure we move forward together with a collective vision."

"I think my role is to understand and articulate that vision and to be one of the voices. If my ideas resonate with others—the board, the staff, the community—then I will steer things in the direction of those ideas that make sense for this place. But I didn't come here to make Penland into something that looks quite different from the Penland we all know."

Her explanation for why she wanted this difficult and complex job included a strong interest in preserving and improving the facility, a desire to learn development skills, and a deep belief in Penland's purpose: "I really believe in this



Jean and Tom on the porch at Bonnie's Place.

idea that art is something that everybody needs to make in their own way. For so many people, art leaves them for one reason or another—when they are five or six, I would imagine. And I think they probably

spend the rest of their life looking for it in some way. A place like Penland nourishes the creative spirit. Whether you are going to make art your profession or it's going to be an avocation, it's so essential for your whole being. I really love to be able to advocate for that."