A Conversation with Carol Erickson DuBosch

By Maggie Rogers

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"I've been thinking about letters since I was twelve," said Carol. "My first lettering class was the summer after seventh grade. I was very good at it and the letters intrigued me." Curious about Carol's calligraphy and teaching background, I sat by her plant-lined living room window one sunny afternoon full of questions, feeling excited and a little awed.

"In high school, my art teacher was a student of Lloyd Reynolds. Calligraphy was her passion, and I was eating it up. I became the school sign maker. I got all those positive strokes for things that I loved to do. There's so much to positive reinforcement at an early age."

"Then I went to Portland State University, and I took lettering from Lloyd Reynolds at the Portland Art Museum School. Probably the first or second evening of class I told him that I lived just a few houses down the street from him and asked if he would like to ride to class together. He didn't want to deal with driving. His mind was elsewhere."

And so his wife drove them, giving the college freshman and the teacher a chance to talk.

"What did you talk about, I asked?"

"Not the lettering. Mostly he worried that I didn't have any languages. When I had an opportunity to study in Italy during my junior year, Lloyd wrote one of my recommendations. He was delighted that finally I'd be getting some language, albeit, Italian."

"I earned a degree in Graphic Design from Portland State in 1967, with a concentration in calligraphy taught by Lloyd and by Jaki Svaren. I took all the art classes offered, but still liked calligraphy the best. At the time I was sure I wanted to become a calligrapher."

Then what? "After I was married, I went to the east coast and had two children. In my five years there I didn't do any calligraphy. I don't think I even owned a pen. I moved back to Portland, was up to here in babies, and said, 'Hmm, I think I miss that pen.'

“I became active with the Western American Branch of the Society for Italic Handwriting, later serving as vice-chairman, membership secretary, and co-chairman.” She also organized Menucha retreats for five years. We reminisced about them and the two international calligraphy conferences she directed in 1987 and 1991 in Portland where I had first watched Carol in action.

Carol started teaching in her home in 1980. “I taught ten people at my dining room table for two years. Then a community college teaching position opened up and someone knew I was teaching at home, so I sort of fell into it. Someone told me that to be a good teacher you have to care very much and be very good at what you want to teach. Just care, very much.”

“I’m currently teaching credit classes, both beginning and advanced calligraphy, at Portland Community College, Clatsop Community College in Astoria, and at the Multnomah Art Center in Portland. I also do some out-of-town workshops.” “Besides Lloyd and Jaki, my teachers have been Lois McClelland and many workshop instructors from across the country. I take a lot of workshops. And I go to calligraphy conferences every summer.”

“Which classes do I love? I love to teach beginners . ‘This is a pen. This is a bottle of ink. This is A.’ It’s the transformation that can occur in eleven weeks. When you think about it-going from not knowing what a lettering pen looks like, to learning a script and being able to write it in three sizes, working with some watercolor and ink, and creating a small book that’s a huge amount of work.” Carol spread her arms wide to punctuate her point. “Whereas in that eleven week period with an intermediate or advanced person, I might tweak their italic, increase their layout skills, or show them a new technique. These are incrementally smaller steps-after that big SWOOSH with beginners. I guess I like the big gains!” “As a calligraphy teacher I am able to help students develop a useful and valuable skill.”

“I’ve always felt it’s important to teach people how to learn. After all, what happens when, ten years down the road, a person wants to make a pie or put washers in faucets if we haven’t taught them how to learn?” I wondered what she found pleasurable in free-lance work. Carol smiled and began ticking them off like the lines of a poem. “One, it allows and enables me to do work I would never dream up myself. The variety I can accomplish is very helpful to me as a teacher- ideas I can show my classes. Two, I can work in my bathrobe, at six a.m. or at midnight. I don’t have to drive anywhere. Three, I get to meet wonderful people and really get to know them.”

What about the deadlines? How do you deal with those? “Knowing that I am not able to control the flow of work, when I accept a job, I do it right now-regardless of the deadline. I don’t know when the next call will be, and I really want to be free to do as much work as I can.”

Needing a stretch, we walked into her compact, organized workroom with its symbols of her craft: a six-foot Ticonderoga yellow pencil up high, cups of pens, brushes and sticks, rows of brightly colored jars of ink, lettering on books, walls, and fabric-covered chairs. In front of us was her sloped writing table and flat working space. I marveled at the easily accessible storage.

“My mother always said, ‘A place for everything, and everything in its place.’ Whenever I buy new stuff, I have to find it a home.” “I keep order by doing daily mail one piece at a time. If I’m going to write a letter, I put it under this rock, and then write. If I need to pay a bill, I write the check then.” She grinned resignedly. “I know it’s compulsive, but in a place as small as this … ,” and she gestured around the room. Carol turned to the counter-height table along the opposite wall, pointing to the paper cutter. “I don’t think I could get out of bed in the morning without it.” We chuckled and she noted the advantages of standing up to work: “Lots of free arm movement, especially because I often have things to do that are big.”

Standing before two ceiling high bookshelves full of art references, I asked her if she were to sit for a portrait, what tools would she hold? Carol picked out two brushes, a Speedball C-2, and a bone folder. We laughed, and I asked what lettering had moved her the most. After thinking for a time, she replied, “The Trajan Column in Rome. When I visited it at the age of twenty, I sat in the middle of the courtyard, in October, and wrote Lloyd Reynolds a postcard. A memorable day! Those inscriptional Roman Capitals move me because of Lloyd’s extreme respect for them.”

And then we adjourned to her garden.

Maggie Rogers is co-editor of a journal on wild mushrooming, gardens haphazardly, and occasionally poses as owner of Fungal Cave Books.