portland Society for Calligraphy
NEWSLETTER
SPRING 1985

Jaki Svaren

Jaki lives on 1½ acres at the top of Mt. Scott in Portland with her supportive husband, one of their four children, two great danes, three cats, fourteen hens, and two roosters. The bees are in the apple blossoms, the peas are up in the garden, their woods is carpeted with Johnny-jump-ups, and a pileated woodpecker's call is in the air.

Jaki's studio is downstairs with a big east window, lots of big drawers and a collection of calligraphy on the walls. Upstairs the family kitchen faces Mt. Hood and the living room houses a marvelous collection of memorabilia and art work.

Carol Erickson and I interviewed Jaki in this atmosphere of warmth and comfort on the first day of May. Portions of the tape-recorded interview follow.

I was born in Bend. After graduation from Bend High School I came to Portland and attended Reed College for two years. One marriage and six years later I went back to school at the University of Oregon to become a general art teacher. Shortly after graduation, Russell and I were married and in 1956 we came to Portland. After substituting that first year and getting to every high school in the city except Cleveland, I was hired at Grant High School as a jewelry teacher. The year after that, my job was changed to take Don Kunz's position as the commercial art teacher. I was expected to be able to teach all the different alphabets. That's when I was learning. I would learn one alphabet at night and teach it the next day, which was *heavy duty*. I learned a lot very quickly and was practicing many hours a day. With teaching full time at Grant and two young children, life was full. I understand people who have to juggle things in order to make it all work out. I got my masters degree from the University of Oregon by going to Eugene in the summertime and taking night classes at Portland State.

How did you get started in calligraphy?

Russell and I were both sculptors when we were married. I really think it is wonderful to have two artists in the family, but I think it might be a mistake for them both to be in the same field. I decided to change; it was a very pragmatic thing. I started calligraphy for two major reasons: I wanted to find another field and I dearly loved Lloyd Reynolds. I thought the letter forms were wonderful. One of the people for whom I substituted at Grant High School was Daryl Herman. Her grade books were all in beautiful italic and her freshmen were learning italic.

Who were your most influential teachers?

There were probably three: Lloyd Reynolds, Arnold Bank and Mark Sponenburgh. I had not learned italic when I studied with Lloyd back in the '40s. I had taken art history and creative writing from him but his calligraphy classes were not yet developed. I thought I could teach myself. So, I got the book and sat down and did everything wrong, but I worked hard at it. When I thought I was doing very, very well I went to the art museum to take a class from Lloyd, expecting him to be thrilled with my wonderful progress. Instead he looked at my work and said, "Don't worry about it, it's going to get better." I was able to study formally with Lloyd Reynolds for seven years.

I always think of Lloyd more as a teacher than a calligrapher. He was not so interested in turning people into calligraphers. He wanted to turn people into human beings who understood each other. Lloyd was

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trying to wake people up to their own potentials, to the fact that calligraphy was a way to discover what you could do and to help you understand about art. I continued to study with him unofficially. I could stop in and see him after my night class. And my learning was continuous.

Arnold Bank was a calligrapher and a commercial person. He knew what was necessary as far as being successful. He stood up at his workshop in the early '60s and said, "Any of you who want to set yourselves up as calligraphers will have to have at least ten different alphabets at your fingertips as readily as you can now do italic." We couldn't even name ten. I was so embarrassed, I thought of myself as pretty professional by that time. I had sold a few pieces; I was teaching a lot. I decided I would learn ten different alphabets and that any student who had been a student of mine for a year would at least know ten different alphabets existed and that they were legitimate.

I had a wonderful teacher, Mark Sponenburgh, who is now retired head of the Art Department at Oregon State University. He was the history of sculpture teacher at the University of Oregon when I was there. He gave me a great sense of love for sculpture and architecture. He turned on about these things the same way Lloyd did about alphabets—with that vigor—just unquestioning love of his field which, I think, helped me as much as anything to be a teacher. I like to do calligraphy, but I really think of myself as a teacher. Mark Sponenburgh had a great sense of scholarship: Know what you're talking about before you talk about it.

Those are my formal teachers. I learn so much from my students. I think if you keep your mind open, you'll learn things wherever you are.

What jobs are you working on now?

I do very little commercial work any more. Most of the jobs that come in to me go to my students. I still do work for Bonneville Power, the American Board of Nuclear Medicine, and Kaiser Permanente.

Currently I am working on *Written Letters*. My publisher wants it cut down to fit into an eleven-inch shelf. Louis Strick promises to continue to publish the big spiral book, but a lot of bookstores don't want to handle it. It's outsize and because of the spiral you can't put it into the bookshelf and read the spine. Rather than just letting them cut it off, I am reorganizing it. Since it is being reprinted I'm taking the opportunity to make some changes. I have redone the Humanist Bookhand and changed some things that bother me. I have rewritten the Italic Handwriting.

You also wrote a book for children called Lojor's Letters.

Lojor's Letters never did sell well. Originally it was in full color and much more attractive than in its present form. The publisher cut and rearranged portions and the reproduction of the pencil work (it was all written in pencil) was poor. I have gotten lovely letters from people who have used it in teaching youngsters and teaching mentally impaired people italic handwriting. It has been a very valuable book for some people. It is mainly for children *helped* by an adult.

Where did you learn your relaxation techniques?

I have taken some Hatha Yoga classes (these are exercise classes, not religious classes), I have done some reading about it. The main thing I learned was how valuable it was to have something so demanding of you that you couldn't think of anything else. Like when I learned to stand on my head, I had to think about *standing on my head*, I could not be thinking about planning dinner. I have always been an overachiever who was doing sixteen things at once and just to find out what it was like to do only one thing and to do that one thing well was valuable.

Something else that helped me was when a doctor gave me tranquilizers my first year of teaching. I only took them three days according to his directions. What I did was discover what it felt like to be relaxed. I look forward to the exercises we do in class just as much as my students.

Is the favorite place you talk about in class a real or imaginary place?

The favorite place I talk about in my classes is a place beyond Estacada called Roaring River, where sunlight comes down through the branches. There are rocks to clamber over and a little wild path. At least it used to be like that.

I really resonate with central Oregon and I think it is because I was born there. The Metolius River area is another favorite place. Our family has gone camping there for years and years. Any more it is a real sentimental journey to get together with a few of the kids and go to some of our favorite old spots. It used to be I had more favorite places, but since I have learned new ways of looking at things, any place can be a favorite. I don't have to go to a special place as long as I have it inside me.

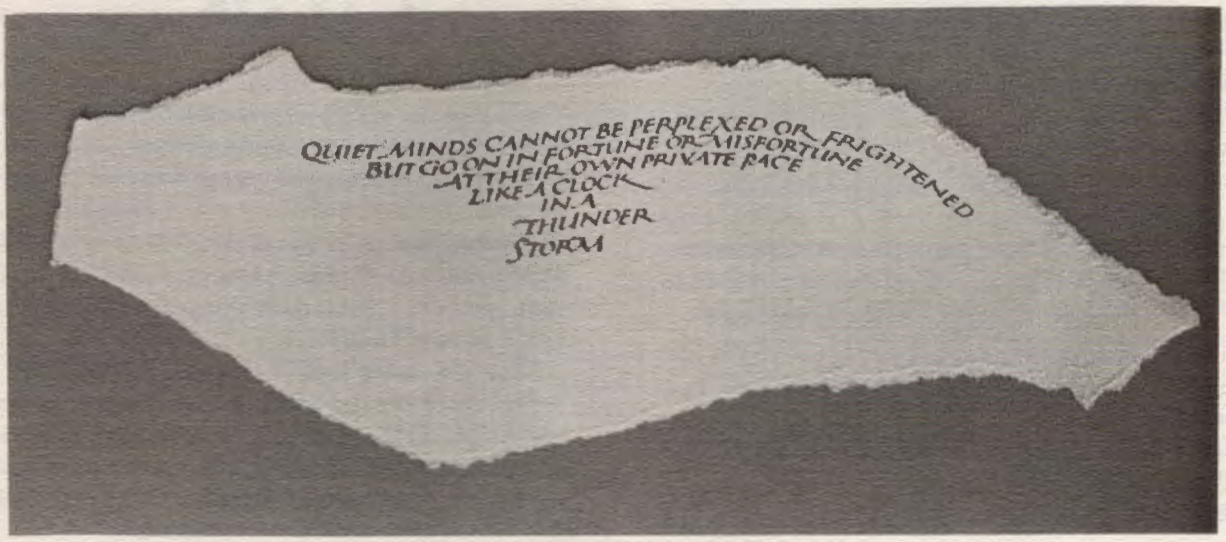
Do you still go flyfishing?

I don't flyfish much any more. I've gotten so I don't like to catch fish or kill anything. Russell and I still like to walk in the woods and look at the water and look at the fish with our Polaroid glasses.

How did the retreat at Menucha begin?

The first retreat at Menucha was a result of a suggestion by one of my students. The environment in which I found myself teaching at that time was so hectic. There was so much noise impinging upon the calligraphy space that I was beside myself trying to talk while our neighbors were hammering frames for canvas to paint on, and my students could not concentrate. One of my students said, "Jaki, what we need is a retreat," to get away from these distractions. She suggested we call Father Jim Parker for suggestions on how to organize a retreat. We called Menucha on his recommendation, and there had been a cancellation two weekends from that time. I can't help but feel that we were supposed to go. We now have Menucha scheduled two or three years in advance.

There were nineteen of us that first year, about 1968. It was the first time in my whole life that I had really been able to get away from distractions. I didn't know what it was like to be in a place where nothing could get at me; I could concentrate under those circumstances. It seemed like a very precious thing to share. To get back to the idea again that I am a teacher, things that are helpful for me are the things I really try to share with my students. I think we all are always students; I hope so. The Quiet Time Menucha is a time that allows you to be free of distraction and, as much as possible, really totally free. It was an idea whose time had come. Where can you go to have real quiet? Not even the public library. Quiet seems so much to have gone out of style.



We plan the retreat during February, two weeks before finals, when students are very much in need of a break. The first February at Menucha was after a big windstorm. A lot of birch trees had been blown down; we went out and peeled birch bark and wrote on it.

Is it difficult with you and Russell both working in the art department of the same community college?

Russell is very supportive. He will tell me, "Have you been cleaning house? Why haven't you been in your studio?" There is just truly no professional jealousy and I think part of that is because I am in calligraphy and not sculpture. I still am very much a three-dimensional person. I still love to do things like that. As my eyes continue to get worse and worse I probably will do more and more of it because minutiae are difficult to see. I am so excited about the Vita-Lites because I think that's going to help a lot of people with their eyes.

What are Vita-Lites?

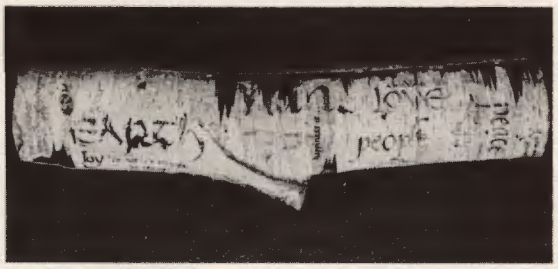
After all these years of complaining about headaches and damage to our eyes from cheap fluorescent lights, I discovered Vita-Lites. Previously I had only known to turn the lights out and wear visors. Vita-Lites, patented by Duro-Test, are not new—they have been around a long time; it's just that the information about them hadn't gotten to me. Ted Mahr, a young man who is a law librarian at the University of Iowa, wrote to me and included an outline of the paper he is sending to the Library of Congress. He has done firm research on fluorescent bulbs and has four pages of footnotes.

Vita-Lites produce full-spectrum light, 91 per cent is absorbed by the eye, with only 9 per cent glare. Cool white fluorescent lights produce 68 percent usable light, the rest glare. Vita-Lites use 25 percent less electricity and have a life of 64,000 hours as opposed to 6,000 hours for regular fluorescent tubes.

Some architects in California are specifying Vita-Lites in schools to help reduce hyperactivity and tension in children. Some cases of clinical depression can be cured by putting people in front of Vita-Lites. They do not distort colors like regular fluorescent bulbs. Russell and I bought twelve Vita-Lites and put them in the office. It is just like someone opened a skylight.

Do you have a favorite story?

I have one real favorite just now (they change). Two Zen Monks were walking along and they came to a river. It was a shallow river and there was a beautiful girl standing on one side wringing her hands because she couldn't get across the water. The old monk picked her up and carried her across and deposited her on the other side. The monks kept going and about ten miles down the road the young monk turned to the other monk and said, "I don't think you should have picked her up. I don't think it was right for you to hold that woman in your arms and carry her like that." The old monk laughed. "You mean you're still carrying her. I put her down back by the water."



Birch Log from First Menucha

Another good quote which means more as I get older is: "The time for the hawthorne to bloom is when the hawthorne is blooming." I tend to want to believe that if it is time for me to take my shoes off and run barefoot in the sand at the beach, it doesn't matter if I am 16 or 100.

Transcribed by Jeanne Biden

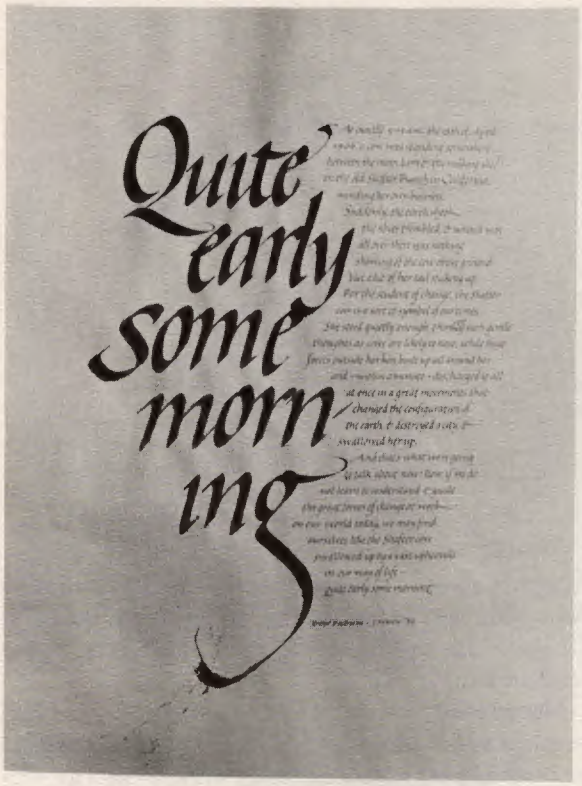
A Teacher First

"You have to think of calligraphy as work, so that you can put it up there with the ironing and mopping and mowing the lawn." Svaren

This is one of dozens of quotes scattered through a battered notebook, a six-year notebook of class notes that brings back memories of the pivotal teacher in my experience, Jaki Svaren. Mentor, friend, artist, tyrant, mother . . . she is those things also, but, first and last, Svaren is TEACHER.

"Every morning is the first morning." Svaren

Jaki would say this as she put on her cardboard visor, turned off the lights and led us through stretching and quieting exercises that prepared us for our work. I felt silly at first, looked forward to them eventually, now I actually do the exercises on my own.



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"If you want to study something easy—study math, not calligraphy." Svaren

And Jaki was right, calligraphy is hard. It is hard to see what the letters are like, and it is so hard to duplicate them. I would work and work and work; finally when the letters were good, when they actually copied the model sheet reasonably well, Jaki would smile just a little, hesitate, and then say, "Now make them come *alive*."

"When the doing is more important than you are, the words will dance." Svaren

The classes became familiar as I repeated them over and over. I sat in the same seat, surrounded by special friends who shared my joy in letters as well as friends who really only cared to learn enough to do place cards. Both kinds are fine, elitest calligraphers are few but boring to me.

"Relax. Be a student. Don't try to show me how much you already know." Svaren

Jaki does know. She can see her student's letters better than any other teacher I've studied with. She is able to tell you exactly why the letter is wrong and exactly what to do to correct it. All teachers try to do this. Jaki does it best.

"DO NOT bring me anything that is ill-considered." Svaren

I hated the sixth class in a ten-week session. By then Jaki was frustrated. We had never done enough, never tried hard enough, never practiced enough to meet her demanding standards. And she told us so.

Then she would soften, admit that she, too, had never done a piece she didn't want to do over, and say, "*Love* your letters today because that is where you are, and where you are is where you are supposed to be (. . . . as long as you are doing your best)" she would mutter as a postscript.

"Calligraphy is a way of being." Svaren

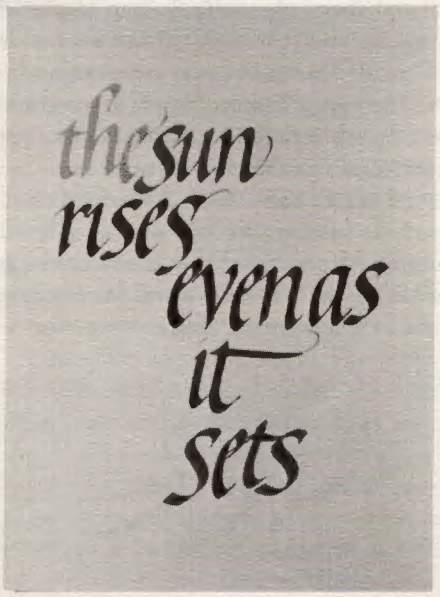
So it is for Jaki Svaren. And she has given me glimpses of how it can be for me, her student, also. Part of that way of being is to love her students as much as she loves her letters. It shows, Jaki.

I've looked back through the notebooks again. On one sample of italic, Jaki's notes indicate errors in slope, scale, spacing, pen angle. I sigh. Then I find that once, just once, on a sample of half-uncial, she had written in her tiny, red-ink-penned personal script: "Wow! Well done." This makes it all worth it for me; maybe just for a moment it was all worth it for Jaki, too.

Calligraphers love quotes and collect them as others collect clothes or salt shakers or cars. The one that best fits my feelings about Jaki Svaren is this one:

"If I esteemed you less, envy would kill pleasure." Percy Bysshe Shelly

Lorinda Moholt



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Bone Alphabet

Once upon a time a lady named Jaki went BONE-anas. She gathered her calligraphy students and proclaimed, "Lo, I am tired of holding my pen so steadily—45 degrees is a drag! I yearn to be free!" One bone-tired student stirred and asked, "GWAT did she say?"

The scribelings were puzzled, but they knew their BONEamie was not a BONEhead.

Living in terror that Lloyd would find no pen angle, Tom Gourdie would join it, Donald Jackson would gild it, she gave birth to her BONEfied new letter form.

A fine fable, find the facts following.

The Bone alphabet was developed in 1972 by Jaki Svaren as a teaching tool. Bone is indigenous to the calligraphic climate here in the Pacific Northwest. The letters are Humanist Bookhand freely written with pen twisting (variable pen angle). Bone is bold and contemporary with historical roots.

Most historical hands involve some pen manipulation, and Jaki finds bone gives the student the experience of loosening wrist and fingers while learning the playful letters. This concept of changing pen angle while writing enables students to see and write the traditional alphabets, especially Roman Majuscules.

Jaki suggests students write Bone so the letters touch and create beautiful spaces between and inside the letters. She says, "Frame the white space with the black lines." Work with Bone gives students an appreciated understanding of negative space.

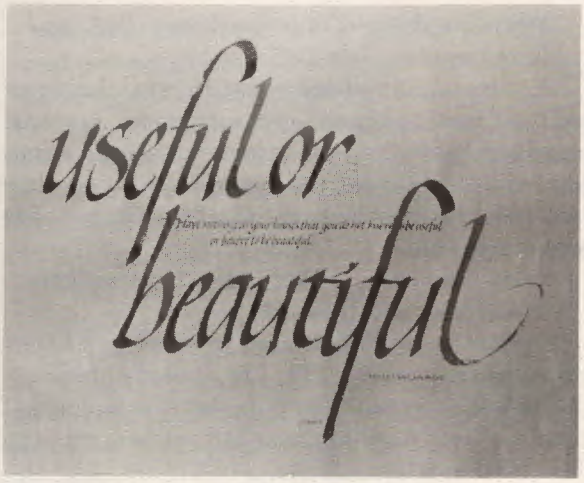
Jaki named her alphabet Bone because of the bone-like shape of the basic stroke, but wondered if another name could be found. Patsy Lee, a student of Jaki's, suggested using the Chinese word for bone, gwat; however the new name didn't stick.

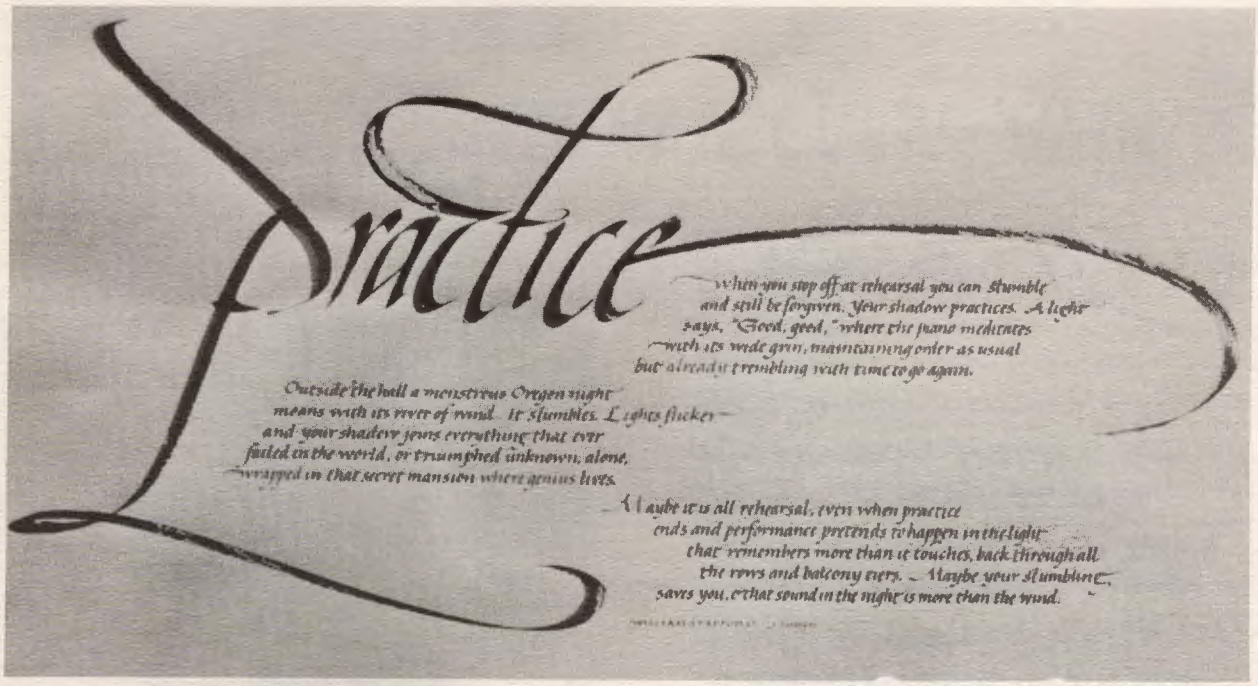
Writing Bone involves body rhythms and each calligrapher gives a personal touch to the letters in this way. Jaki sees the alphabet as still evolving and asks, "If you come up with some great new forms, please send me a copy."

Homemade tools work well to write Bone, and Jaki suggests using cut-off chopsticks, tongue depressors, or reeds. Wide brass pens also work well. The tool should be smooth to encourage the sliding and turning which create the strokes Lloyd Reynolds called "sensuous."

Historical roots, teaching tool, sensuous, playful, contemporary . . . Jaki created all of this with a chopstick in her hand and the spirit of artist and teacher in her heart. "Enjoy these letters! Relax and play. They are meant to be an educational TOY." Jaki invites us to share her wonderful Bone alphabet.

Carol Erickson





Menucha

I have been coming to Menucha for many years. I think the first time was the second year that it took place. In the beginning, before the number of Retreat addicts was very large, there was only one Menucha a year—in February, when the winter winds from the Columbia River Gorge still roar through the boughs of the huge trees on the grounds, and the buds on the bushes are growing fat in anticipation of spring. I came in order to get a dose of Lloyd Reynolds. It was a couple of years before I learned that the Retreat was Jaki Svaren's idea.

This idea turned out to be a humdinger. As new calligraphy societies have sprung up throughout America, many of them have incorporated an annual Retreat into their programs. The people, place and organization vary in each area, but something magic always happens at a Retreat. When a group of people withdraw from their everyday lives and gather in a quiet place to practice calligraphy together, they create a special kind of atmosphere that seems to nurture souls as well as letters. During those sweet, often painful hours of writing, and the intense conversations about letters and life before and after writing, many participants first begin to trust and respect themselves and their work. The Retreat experience has enriched the lives of hundreds of people and has, in the process, contributed greatly to the qualities of tolerance, generosity and enthusiastic communication that are characteristic of the calligraphy movement in the United States today.

Georgianna Greenwood

Penultima

Penultima was formed in 1976 by three local calligraphers to sell good calligraphic prints. Isabelle Ryan is the bookkeeper, Patsy Lee is the secretary and local sales representative. Jaki Svaren does calligraphy and initiates ideas. She is presently working on an embossing kit to be called EMBOZ, Embossographics by Penultima.

Penultima was founded to bring the general public an awareness of the artistry of the calligraphic design and its enhancement of the meaning of the written word. It provides an outlet for calligraphers to have their artwork reproduced and sold at reasonable prices. The reproductions are available in stationery stores, gift shops and bookstores throughout the local area.

We would like to have more calligraphers represented, and welcome submissions, but cannot promise to print them all. A mail order catalog is available for $2 by writing to Penultima, Inc., 11182 S.E. Tyler Road, Portland, Oregon 97266.

Patsy Lee