

A Collaboration with Customers

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Jennifer's career and lifestyle. As a board member and treasurer of the Vermont Crafts Council and one of several artisans who have for 25 years

operated the Artisans Hand, a cooperative craft gallery in Montpelier, Jennifer feels connected to the broader community of craftspeople. Of the gallery, she says, "We run it in a way that supports the crafts community the best way that we can."

Co-managing the cooperative gallery and running her own business have given Jennifer opportunities to

continue to learn and grow outside of the studio. In this, she believes her MPS education has been one of her biggest assets. "I feel like the

education I got at Miss Porter's made me able to learn anything," she says.

It also gave her "the confidence to explore non-traditional paths," she says, including attending the "very experimental" Goddard College, where she discovered her calling as a potter. Afterward, her career choice dovetailed with her desire to be a mother who could participate in field trips and other school functions and who was always available to her children. As she says, "I was a working mom, but I was home."

Now Jennifer's two children are grown, but she doesn't have much interest in retiring. She admits, however, that as she has gotten older, she has had to spread out the tasks involved in the grueling physical labor of working with clay. Still, she manages to

fill a 36-cubic-foot kiln every three weeks. "I use probably two to three tons of clay a year," she estimates.

Jennifer also continues to be a resource to her community. Along with a number of other Vermont artisans, she opens her studio to the public every Memorial Day weekend to do demonstrations of her craft. She also occasionally mentors local high school students and others with an interest in pottery.

"I do think that society needs to have makers in it, that it wouldn't be a good thing if the only place that people could buy hand-made things was from an import store. Society needs contact with hand-made things," she says.

To see Jennifer's work, visit www.thistlehillpottery.com.

Art Sale in the spring, which brings together other art forms on campus, including, painting, photography and jewelry making. For Oriana, it was a chance to be a part of a larger group that encompasses all branches of art at Miss Porter's. The Art Sale raises money for various causes. Oriana was also a major contributor to the tile murals created for the Connecticut Children's Medical Center.

Today, Oriana's art "group" is even larger; she's attending Alfred University. *U.S. News and World Report* ranked Alfred's internationally known M.F.A. program in ceramics the best in the nation in its last three reviews. During her first year, her courses focused on art and materials beyond clay. The absence of clay was frustrating for her, but she knows it will help ground her pottery with a better understanding of art in general.

When she graduates, she hopes to leave Alfred with more than her art. "I'm going to take a lot of psychology courses and hope to go to graduate school for art therapy," she says. "It's a small branch of psychology where you deal with people who are emotionally distressed by having them show you what they are feeling rather than tell you."

Showing is something that comes easily to Oriana. Throughout her days at Miss Porter's she spent hours and hours in the pottery studio. "People called us 'Pott-heads.' Not for the reason you think, but for our pottery. We were always in the studio creating things," she explains.

For Oriana, being at Farmington was not just about the education, but also the environment – and she made the most of it. "Miss Porter's was such a supportive place. I knew I'd get more there than from other schools I was looking at. I'm more secure in who I am now – and because of my pottery courses, I just want to find a studio and get to work."

Caitlin Gross Rockwell '88 is a freelance producer in Washington, D.C.



A Love of Textiles

By Valerie Stambaugh Robbins '84

When you enter the studio of **Julia Brennan '76**, you are impressed by the light and openness of her space. Tall ceilings, white walls and working surfaces with natural light create the perfect textile conservator's environment. Spread out on the large center table lays a remarkable 16th-to-17th-century Flemish tapestry. She has already tested the dyes for fastness and cleaned the textile, without harmful machinery or cleaning methods. Now she is working on stabilizing the piece and reweaving areas of loss.

As owner and chief conservator of Textile Conservation Services, a D.C.-based business she founded in 1995, Julia oversees and works on a myriad of textile conservation projects for

clients from around the world, from individuals seeking to return family heirlooms to their pristine state, to international organizations, museums and embassies needing to maintain and display textiles.

Today in her studio a variety of projects are in progress: Antique placemats that have been cleaned and repaired; a contemporary French silkscreen mounted with hand-stitching on a muslin-covered rigid support; an 1811 sampler stitched by an 11-year-old girl; and a turn-of-the-century, delicate, white christening dress. Past projects include the dress worn by Miss Kitty in the TV series "Gunsmoke," an Andy Warhol exhibit and numerous displays for embassies and cultural institutions. The Kennedy Center also retains Julia as textile conservator.

Julia's love of textiles began early. She grew up in Southeast Asia, the daughter of a Foreign Service officer. Her father's job took the family from Indonesia

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Learning to Be an Artisan

By Caitlin Gross Rockwell '88



Oriana Jackson '02 never took an art class before she arrived at Miss Porter's. "Sure, I cut-and-paste with Elmer's glue and molded Play-Dough with my brothers, but my prior schools focused only on traditional academics – not art," she says.

That all changed during Oriana's sophomore year at Farmington. To fulfill

her art requirement, Oriana decided to take Pottery I from Susan Reeder Moss. The course was an introduction to clay with a major focus on learning to use the potter's wheel. Oriana also learned the basics of hand building, surface patterning and glazing.

The class exposed Oriana to the world of art. She not only grew to love pottery, but she credits much of her talent to her teacher: "I love Susan. She's so supportive. When something wasn't working for me, Susan would say, 'Try this or try that.' It inspired me."

Oriana was so inspired that she continued her art classes, completing Pottery II and three semesters of Advanced Placement Pottery. Coupling her love of clay with her desire to help others, Oriana engrossed herself in the



first Miss Porter's "Bowl-a-thon," founded by two seniors during her first semester of pottery. She made most of the bowls for

the event that year. Her junior year she was ready to run the event herself, which she did in memorable fashion for two years.

Not what one would typically imagine with pins and funny shoes, this Bowl-a-thon is an art-based charity fundraiser. The Porter's community – students, faculty, dorm parents and their children – comes together and makes the bowls, pinch-pots and other ceramics that are sold. The money raised goes to Foodshare, the foodbank for the Greater Hartford area. "At the last sale, we raised over \$1,000," Oriana says.

She was also a leader in the annual

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A Love of Textiles

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to Thailand, Bangladesh and Nepal – lands full of rich textiles, colorful vistas and decoration, and robust culture. Her mother decorated the family home with textiles, and a love of these fabrics and the cultures they represented took hold in Julia.

While she was a student at Farmington, Miss Freeze inspired her to study art history. Julia spent January of her senior year documenting the handicrafts of Bangladesh, traveling through villages, photographing people and work, and ultimately publishing her photographic and written journal. At Barnard she majored in art history and Japanese studies. After working as a photojournalist in Katmandu, Julia received a master's degree in art history from the University of Pennsylvania.

"At the time, the university had no major for the study of textiles," she says. "They considered it a derivative art form. But I wanted to find a way to combine my love for history with my love of working with my hands."

While attending graduate school she accepted a five-year internship in Philadelphia with a private textile conservator. This training prepared her for her position as assistant conservator at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.

Following this, she began her own company. She also became the executive director of the James Renwick Alliance, a support organization for the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery. Her responsibilities were primarily administrative, but the job afforded her the opportunity to make valuable contacts and learn about contemporary craft art. Her heart, however, was in "hands-on work," and she recently decided to dedicate herself to textile conservation.

Unlike textile restoration, which seeks to return a textile to its original state, conservation arrests deterioration and stabilizes the object. This tricky task includes taking preventive measures, such as controlling pests, archival mounting, and educating museums and individuals about how to properly display and store an item. The work must be fully documented, and it must



be reversible in its treatment to comply with the American Institute for Conservation's standards.

Julia first evaluates and documents the artwork, and then, if possible, cleans the textile using a solvent or special detergent. She stabilizes, stitches or weaves to repair as necessary. Eventually she custom designs a method of display or storage depending on the client's needs and the textile's characteristics.

"My love is really for display – transforming a textile, mounting and displaying it in a way that makes it pop," she says.

Through pro-bono work, lecturing and work for historical societies, she also seeks to create a broader awareness of the value of textile conservation. Every job compels her to learn the history not only of the textile, but also of the culture that shaped it. Clients value her vision and respect for their cultures. For example, the kingdom of Bhutan invited Julia to help establish a national textile museum under royal patronage.

"Bhutan is an isolated and culturally protective country, so much so the government requires citizens to wear traditional dress at all times," Julia explains. Because of her diverse background, Julia had the sensitivity and skills to design a system suited to the museum's needs. She spent a month and a half in Bhutan spearheading the textile museum initiative, teaching courses in conservation and setting up a

database to catalogue the museum's work. She devised methods and materials of conservation that were region-specific and local solutions for storage and display that allow the museum to be self-sustaining.

These days, amid a host of other projects, Julia is launching a conservation survey of the textile collection at Mount Vernon, focused on 60 priority items that have firm attribution to George and Martha Washington. In a comment on this project that sums up her delight in her career, Julia wrote, "Such fun working with these extraordinary 'relics'."

See Julia's website www.caringfortextiles.com for more on her work.

Valerie Stambaugh Robbins '84 is a web designer in Maryland.



Photo by Jennifer Crookes
Alexandra Campbell '03, left, holds the board steady, along with tech crew adviser Jennifer Welch, while Jessica Roessler '03 cuts.

In the Zone

By Alexandra Campbell '03

The high-pitched bzzz of the saw resonates through my body and echoes against the concrete floor. Sawdust flies to the right as the large circular blade eats through the wood. The plastic safety glasses slip down my nose, and a thin sheet of gritty wood particles coat my face and clothing. The smell of sawdust and sweat is dominating, and I take comfort in the familiarity of it. This is my zone.

Off to my left I can hear the loud screech of wood, as it protests screws being driven into it with the bright yellow cordless drills. On the far wall a white board is hung, covered with quick calculations, plans for projects and funny doodles. The set is starting to take shape; piece-by-piece the illusion of a cabin is coming into being. A darkly stained door leans up against white cabinets – a door I built last week. Large sheets of foam are propped up next to the door, odd shapes cut out of them with a hack saw blade. These funny shapes, after some manipulation, become realistic rocks attached to the 10-foot fireplace.

These are the projects that have made up my life the past few

weeks. The projects that, when put together, will become the set that on opening night will be unveiled to the community, helping to tell a story. I love building sets for theatre. I love looking at the small 3-D model and working to turn it into an actuality. I love working with wood; I love solving the endless problems that arise. I love the sense of accomplishment and pride I feel when a set is completed, and I hear people whispering, "It looks so real!" and "How did they do that?" I also love being a girl doing a traditionally male job.

Generally, when I tell people that I work on plays they assume I mean on the stage. I hear exclamations such as "Oh, you're an actress!" or "What plays have you performed in?" In response I explain that I'm in the technical side of theatre and what that entails. Sometimes they just give me a confused look and change the subject, other times they are really interested and want to know what kinds of things I do. Either reaction is fine with me; I don't do it for them. I do it because I enjoy it.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to sit on a panel of students

speaking to alumnae about Miss Porter's School today. There were six of us on the panel. I was the only one who was not a member of our student government, and also the only one who did not play a sport. I told them about my love for building sets, about the set I was currently working on, and about my involvement with technical theatre since freshman year. I also told them about the energizing and empowering effect of power tools, suggesting they use power tools themselves to feel the effects, should they ever have the chance. In response to that I received laughter.

I was asked to speak on the panel to showcase a different side of the School and to convey a form of leadership that differs from the traditional positions. Finding something you love to do is a wonderful gift. One of my Mom's favorite sayings for me is, "Honey, you have to find your passions." It wasn't until recently that I truly appreciated the wisdom in those words. If you don't find something you truly enjoy doing, you are not truly living.

Set building is not something I will do for the rest of my life, but right now I love it, and it has taught me so much. I have learned the value of working with others towards a common goal, and I have learned to face challenges and solve problems. But most importantly, I have found something I can say I am good at. I can build a flat strong enough to support the weight of a grown man and turn a blank stage into the inside of a hunting cabin, a room in a house or even inner-city New York. The lessons I have learned and the skills I have developed will follow me wherever I go.



The back of the MPS Tech Crew t-shirt.