Wilma Cogliantry of Christian Lane Quilters

— A Successful and Inspiring Businessperson

© 2009 Wilma Cogliantry, with Kimmy Brunner

Kim: When Vicki Anderson, the Publisher of *Unlimited Possibilities*, told me that I could interview anyone I wanted to for this article, one of the first names to spring to mind was that of Wilma Cogliantry. I confess that I jumped at the chance to talk with her and learn more about what she does and how she does it. For years, I have admired Wilma's kindness, willingness to offer excellent advice, and amazing business acumen. In an industry where many struggle to achieve profitability, Wilma and her husband Jim have built a sterling reputation as well as an extremely successful business, quilting thousands of customer quilts.

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All of us face our own challenges in life, some more than others, and how we face those challenges defines us as people. Wilma's challenges have been many, and she has come through them all with shining colors. Here she is to tell us her approach to the quilting business…

Wilma: "When it comes to quilting, I have no interest in being judged or winning prizes. That others are pleased with my work is a bonus, and that my business is successful reflects my determination to lead a purposeful life. I quilt because of the experiences I have had, because it's how I've taught myself to put conflicting pieces into a whole, because quilting is meaningful to me: my work combines my past with my present and with my future. I quilt because quilting is hopeful, comforting, peaceful, healing and full of joy. I quilt because it is a part of who I am.

When I was a child, my mother had a box of fabric scraps and I would move the silk, brocade and cotton pieces around and imagine them fitting together. Teaching myself how to sew at age ten, I found that even though I had difficulty following directions, I could look at a finished garment and figure out how to make it. My first quilt, a wholecloth, was made in the late 1960's during a time of great personal losses. I found hand quilting was a place where I could cope with grief. When I saw an ad for a longarm quilting machine, I was fascinated. I thought that machine quilting might be a way to make a little money after we retired, but had no clue that quilting would transform our lives.

We made an appointment with a quilting machine dealer and when we stepped into his showroom, there was a monstrously large machine with a plain piece of practice muslin mounted on its frame. A beam of sunlight from an overhead window was shining on it. I saw wholecloth! All the dealer had to do was hand me a pen. I worked full-time during the following year and practiced quilting constantly. Once I was certain that my foundation was as strong as I could make it, that I was capable of doing work I could be proud of and had the ability to shift with the trials that were sure to arise, I hit the quilting market full speed.

My Rooster Quilt was a marketing tool I used to get my business going. I mounted

sheets of wide muslin and batting on the machine and quilted roosters into square spaces, which were then cut apart and bound. I mailed the quilts, along with my brochures, to about seventy quilt shops and guilds. Soon afterwards, I took in my first customer quilt. When I had thirty quilts in my studio, I quit my outside job and began quilting full time. Two years later, I had a year's lead time for customer quilts and when Jim was laid off from his job, we purchased another machine. Jim learned to quilt and he also built our website. Our business grew quickly, and now we both quilt full-time and sell our wide fabrics and "FatBacks!"® over the internet and at quilt shows.

I was raised to view challenge as a way of life and have been incredibly blessed with a life filled with lessons about ambiguity, resilience and love. I don't expect anything to be simple or easy, and I know the difference between what I want and what I need. While I can prepare lessons, it's too stressful to stand in front of a group when I can't remember the words and this is why I don't teach groups. I was born with an Arterial Venous Malformation, and had emergency brain surgery three years ago. The results of the surgery and the medications I take to control seizures have been both challenging and rewarding. I struggle daily to find ways around frustrating physical challenges, confusion from short term memory loss, and the loss of abilities which I formerly took for granted. My continuing recovery is very similar to the way I quilt. I love the process, the evolution and the way I am forced to adapt to difficulties. I'm always delighted and somewhat amused that nothing ever comes out the way I first imagined. Fortunately, the creative side of my brain was not damaged, so I can continue to quilt. I am grateful that I have had this experience, because this struggle has helped me find wholeness and peace.

One of the most positive things I have learned is why I work with people in the way I do. In compensating for my inabilities, I have learned that one of my very best abilities is to cut through all of the excess and find the heart of whatever is in front of me. I find it very satisfying that, without recognizing exactly what I was doing, I used all of the methods of teaching to help other quilters learn. I love showing someone how I do a task and seeing that person light up with excitement. When someone says, "But, it's so simple to do it this way!" I'm delighted, because I never thought how I did things was anything special. Doing things my way is only how I've gotten around what I'm not able to do!

"I quilt because it is a part of who I am."

I love to learn. I deliberately seek experienced teachers and advisors and I listen closely to them. One of my greatest pleasures is working one on one with people who want to learn. I have confidence in my abilities to guide people by using my personal experiences of failures and triumphs and I gain satisfaction in using my strengths to positively influence others and help them reach their goals. There have been people who have made positive differences in my life and I feel tremendously rewarded when I realize that I too have helped another person succeed and feel proud of their accomplishments. I'm not exactly a teacher: I am a student and I am a mentor.

When thinking about how the industry has changed since I first became a machine quilter, it's difficult for me to separate the personal from the industrial. I'm unable to see quilting simply as an industry without thinking of the reasons why people quilt, without considering the history of quiltmaking and giving thought to the purposes of quilts and their makers. People have always had reasons to quilt: to relieve boredom, to show the art which is inside them, to bring comfort to survivors of wars or disasters, to be used as ways to protest inequalities, or to point to the roads of freedom. Some quilters use quilting as a way to provide for their families or as a way to win prizes. People use quilting as a way to survive losses or as a way to make records of their family's history. Some mothers use their hands to sew tiny stitches into quilts as a way to show their love for their sons and daughters.

When I began hand quilting, my reasons had nothing to do with industry. Quilting has helped me survive and has been instrumental

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in how I have changed. The challenges and the growth I've accomplished over the past years by using my quilting as a way to respond to change has led me to a new exciting quilting adventure. Jim and I will be introducing our original line of quilt kits in April at MQX. Our 'Bella Mia' Kits(tm) are designed for people who want to quilt, but are limited in skills that involve math and memory. Our kits have easy to follow directions, vintage blocks which are already appliquéd, pre-cut strips of hand-dyed fabrics and a FatBack. Each quilt will be unique, simple and beautiful.

As an industry, the quilting industry will do what all industries do: it will cycle. These are troubled economic times. Many large businesses will fail and many smaller businesses will thrive. It's difficult to imagine what the future holds for the quilting industry. The industry has evolved rapidly and the future isn't clear. I know that my response to the uncertainty has been to increase advertising, to focus on quality work and move forward with new ideas. Quilting will survive whether it's an industry or not.

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I used to collect old tattered quilts which were in need of repair. One of my favorite quilts is a depression era log cabin. As I took the quilt apart to restore it, I found the maker had pieced strips of fabric onto foundations of muslins, scraps of clothing and squares that had markings which identified the fabric as commercial wrappers for bulk sausage. As I stared at the manufacturer's information on those squares of cotton, I realized that I had seen that same kind of information on present day plastic tubes of sausage. The quilter who made that top used what was available to make that wonderful quilt. Present day quilters do the same.

As far as the future of quilting: I imagine future quilters peering into a glass window in a quilting museum and imagine them shaking their heads in awe and wonderment. One may say to the other, "Look at that magnificent antique quilt! My stars and garters, it's dated

2009! I wonder why the Earthlings called their tools 'Longarm Machines' when their own arms were so incredibly short?" UPM

Kim Brunner comes from a long line of quilters, and has made it her goal to bring her family's quilting history into the future. Her work has won multiple national and international level awards and has been featured in numerous books, magazines, calendars, and on the website of the American Quilter's Society. Known for her crazy sense of humor and her beautiful feather designs, her style combines laughter with years of experience. Her columns appear in *Unlimited Possibilities* and *Machine Quilting Unlimited* magazines, and she travels all over the country teaching both private and show classes in quilting and design. She lives in Minnesota with her husband, two children, an awful lot of fabric, and assorted pets.

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