

LAURA VANDERBEEK

"But I'm not much of a weaver," Laura demurred when first asked to be a subject for one of these portraits. But later she acquiesced: "I'd be very honored." Since she joined the Guild in 1974, the organization and its members have been a vital part of Laura's life. She insists on regarding herself as a staunch and appreciative member, not particularly as a leader. However, she has served the Guild with vigor, good humor, and patience on numerous committees, and for many years she was the Guild's treasurer. She especially values the Guild's tradition of members helping one another, and sharing their skills rather than competing.

Laura was a knitter first and still considers knitting her forte, though she became an excellent spinner and dyer, and yes, she does weave. Like our booth at the county Fair, she is dedicated to "fiber arts". We have seen some of her favorite garments at Guild meetings, including a pink and gray lacey tabard, knit from lichen-dyed yarn spun entirely on a drop-spindle during an Alaskan cruise. The subtlety and precision of her work can be appreciated only with a long, close look. A cardigan sweater knitted from several exotic fibers is a special achievement. A single-ply silk (which came from the estate of Anne Meerkerk, her friend and mentor) is carried throughout with one of Laura's handspun exotic fibers: alpaca, camel, qiviut, fine wools. The silk gives a unifying sheen to the whole garment, which is knit in color-blocks of the natural fibers, with a single rib of twist stitch (in silk only) separating the blocks. The fact that the garment has an even tension throughout and hangs well is a tribute to Laura's craftsmanship as both a spinner and a knitter.

During the 1980s, Laura regularly taught advanced knitting and beginning spinning at the former Coupeville Spinning and Weaving Shop. She will still happily help interested knitters, though she doesn't want to commit to the demands of scheduled classes. As a spinner, she "enjoys the new challenge of different fibers," though wool in its many varieties has always been a good staple in her supply closet. A favorite breed of wool? "Whatever I'm spinning at the moment". And when people ask 'Is that Coriedale (or Romney, or whatever)? She advises." Just say 'Yes'."

The inspiration for her to learn both weaving and spinning was a handsome antique coverlet, still in her possession. The yarn was spun and dyed with madder by her great-grandmother; it was then sent to a weaver, according to Canadian customs at the time. She has found her coverlet pictured and documented in *Keep Me Warm One Night* (Burnham, University of Toronto Press). The coverlet first made her want to weave, but later she decided (with characteristic thoroughness) to begin at the beginning and learn to spin. She began to spin in about 1974, using the fleece from her own sheep.

This is a lady who draws energy and inspiration from others who share her passions. Some of the people who have illuminated her own work include Anne Meerkerk, the Guild's first President, who (with other early Guild members) taught her to weave; and Mildred Sherwood, our second President, who taught her to spin on a drop spindle. "It required the utmost patience on Mildred's part," Laura says. "I discovered why they call it a drop spindle; it kept dropping all the time". She learned dyeing with fermented lichens from Michelle Whiplinger in a trade for knitting lessons. A special pleasure over the years has been in watching the flowering career of fellow member Anita Mayer, who still wears a handspun knit shirt she commissioned from Laura many years ago. She greatly admires Sharon Alderman's color work and also her excitement and pleasure in her work, but (like the rest of us) Laura is overwhelmed by Sharon's prolific output. Presently she is about to put to the test Judith MacKenzie's Spin-In tip that three-ply yarn knits up to a smoother fabric than two-ply. A lucky grandson (one of seven grandchildren) will be the recipient of the resulting sweater in natural gray wool, a celebration of his new Ph.D.

Laura comes from a farming background, and lives on the family dairy farm (Muzzall Farms, south of Oak Harbor), where they raise Guernsey and Jersey cows. Though she was born in her grandmother's house in Everett (since her father was away serving in World War I), Laura was raised on the Island, graduating from Oak Harbor High School. Besides farming his own land, her father was manager of the Oak Harbor farmer's co-op, and was also heavily involved in civic organizations, most notably the group that brought Deception Pass Bridge into being. Later in life he realized ruefully "I helped bring about the very conditions I deplore!" Laura's role model was her mother, Edna Zimmerman, "an intelligent city girl, graduated at the top of her class, who came here as a farmer's wife, when there were no amenities." Though she had six children, Edna "was always her own person," and always made time to read in the afternoon.

A young man from Michigan (a transplant, though, from Oak Harbor), who came back to Whidbey to work on his uncle's neighboring farm during his college summer break caught Laura's eye. But, observing how easily he dealt with the girls who flocked around him, she figured any girl who took him seriously had to be crazy. However, when he returned as a fulltime worker during the Depression, Laura was a mature woman of 18 and she not only dated him, she married him! For some years the couple lived in Detroit and other locations, determined by her husband's work as a hydraulic engineer, but moved back to the west coast in 1951, bringing their three children: Susan, Tom and David. On his retirement in 1973, Laura and Herman moved to the Whidbey house that Laura's parents built in the 1950s, replacing the original farmhouse, which had burned down. Though they lived on the farm, the Vanderbeeks were not involved in the daily operations of the farm, which by then had passed to the hands of Laura's older brother Robert. A nephew, Ron, is the present farm manager.

Besides raising her family, Laura has been active in church and community organizations, especially the League of Women Voters during the period the Vanderbeeks lived in Oregon. Later, on the Island, Laura found the spinning circles and the Guild, and that, along with commitments to her church, has kept her life very full. Though her husband died in 1981, Laura has some company at the house since her daughter Susan, a chef, has moved back to share the home. Both of them are excited about the opening in September of Susan's own restaurant in Coupeville: The Oystercatcher, at 901 Grace St.

Laura and Susan (a skilled handworker herself) also share a love of gardening and the outdoors and the location of the family house give them plenty of opportunity to indulge their passion. Their wide lawn runs down to fencing along the low eastside bluff, and its borders abound with richly colored, well-tended flowers. Old trees and snags provide perches for eagles, which Laura loves to watch at play in the air currents that swirl and eddy over the channel. Laura's bedroom looks out over this garden. The bedroom windows have interior shutters with wooden frames, which are filled with panels of Laura's textile work – fine handspun singles of a very long-stapled wool that looks almost like linen, and, yes, they are woven. One set is in precise Bronson lace, and the other is a charming combination of several hand-manipulated weaves. Laura likes to have her fingers *in the fiber*.