

Empty Spools turns 25!

By Jennifer Rounds

Even better, what if you could spend five glorious days with creative types who get why you need to play with color and fabric?

The truth is you can. Get on your computer and type *empty spools seminars* in the search bar. There it is: your special quilting place. And, look at that, you don't have to clean, cook, or make your bed, plus you can apprentice to quilting world glitterati.

The Empty Spools Seminars, or Asilomar as it's widely known, are now turning out a second generation of "quilt lifers." When founders Diana McClun, Gayle Wells, and Suzanne

What if you could shed your daily to-do list, pack up your fabric and tools, and escape to a beachside quilting retreat? Wouldn't that be a slice of heaven?





Cox inaugurated the first session back in 1985, the concept of quilting retreats was revolutionary. The five-day immersion format was their answer to a need they recognized for quality quilting education. The standard one-day, in-shop or guild-sponsored workshops were fine, but limiting. Quilters needed exposure to the full spectrum of unique artistry that comprises the craft, in a distraction-free setting where dedicated stitchers could focus on learning from the very best teachers.

The trio accomplished that goal with the Empty Spools curriculum and upped the ante by hosting the workshops at Asilomar on California's Monterey Peninsula, a breathtaking setting of Julia Morgan-designed Arts and Crafts-style buildings, winding wilderness paths, and abundant coastal wildlife. Artful pursuits in an inspirational venue—that's why Empty Spools has been a trusted source for quality quilting education and fun for thousands.

There are those who've attended every year for the past quarter century. Those who have come more than once typically have at least a dozen visits to their credit. They've been known to do crazy things to preserve the precious five days they've circled on their calendars—one Asilomar devotee managed to squeeze in a college-

level final exam while she was there rather than skip the workshop.

Many come from California and its Western neighbors, but a good number travel from all the other states, internationally as well. Husbands and wives; mothers and daughters; sisters, cousins, best buddies, and neighbors: every combination has been represented. Then, of course, there's the singleton, who comes ready to make friends and quilts.

This year marks a great accomplishment: Empty Spools Seminars celebrates its twenty-fifth birthday! Everyone who knows Diana knows that she is not

someone to step into the limelight, but it's impossible to write about these workshops without expressing how much the Empty Spools experience is a reflection of her dreams and hopes for all quilting enthusiasts.

Diana's longtime collaborator Laura Nownes describes her as a mover and shaker whose deep well of creativity has given

It was a week in Paradise, or more specifically, Quilter's Heaven.

—Gail Garber



Gathered together to assemble the quilts, left to right: Dawn Guglielmino, Denise Killingsworth, Lyn White, Freddy Moran, Laura Nownes, Gayle Wells, Dale Fleming, Diana McClun, Suzanne Cox, and Karen Flamme



Five of the celebration quilts (left to right); teachers Freddy Moran and Gwen Marston (far left); and Asilomar founders Gayle Wells, Diana McClun, and Suzanne Cox (above)

I treasure Asilomar conferences among the many I have taught for the great students, great staff, and a relaxing and beautiful seaside location—not to be missed!

—Ruth B. McDowell

birth to numerous quilting icons: a trend-setting quilt shop with the original Empty Spools moniker (cofounded with Gayle and a San Francisco Bay Area favorite in its heyday); the best-selling quilting bible *Quilts! Quilts!! Quilts!!!* plus a half-dozen other popular titles; the Empty Spools Seminars; a teacher-development program cosponsored by C&T Publishing; *The Artist's Way* creativity workshops;



and *From Me to You*, a pattern line started with cocreator Laura sold at quilt shops nationwide.

Diana says that she shares those achievements with a slew of talented people. That may be true, but there's truly something special about Diana—call it spirituality, creative energy, or life force—that sets things in motion. She's the one who asks, "What if?" Her joyful energy and welcoming personality draw eager participants.

As 2010 approached, Diana wondered, "What should we do to celebrate our anniversary?" The answer was obvious. They chose to honor the 25 years in the timeless way that quilters do: making anniversary quilts that embrace the contributions of teachers and students who have left their marks on the Empty Spools workshops.

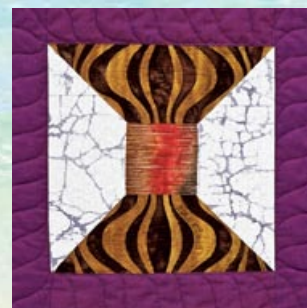
They issued an invitation to submit Spool blocks to the legion of former and current instructors and Artists in Residence (some of whom began teaching after successful stints as featured artists). With no limitations on color, shape or size, contributors simply needed to submit a signed Spool block.

A Who's Who in quilting

Many of quilting's best-known teachers and artists contributed blocks to the six celebratory quilts.



Keri Duke



Ruth McDowell



Louisa Smith



Pat Holly and Sue Nickels



Rosemary Eichorn

Block photos courtesy C&T Publishing



Paula Nadelstern



Cindy Needham



Sharyn Craig



Velda Newman



Kerby Smith

Block photos courtesy C&T Publishing

The Empty Spools veterans responded with a shower of enough blocks to make six quilts! A drawing for one quilt would be held for the attendees at each 2010 Empty Spools session. A team of Bay Area quilters, including Dale Fleming, Dawn Guglielmino, Denise Killingsworth, Freddy Moran, and Laura Nownes as well as Diana, Gayle, and Suzanne, would assemble the quilts.

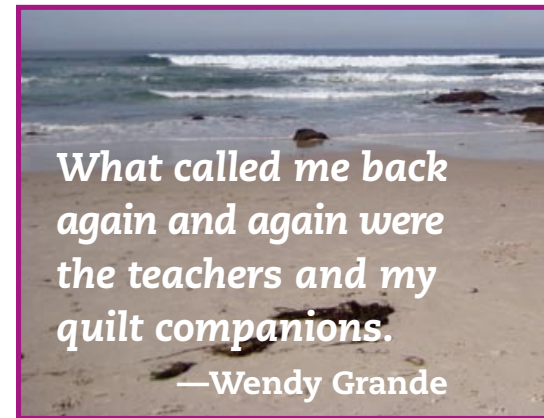
The team met to reminisce, review the anniversary project, preview the finished quilts, and share favorite Empty Spools memories. All agreed that the anniversary project pushed their creativity. “There were so many block styles and not a wallflower in the bunch,” Laura explains. “That forced us to stretch in order to deal with the visual challenges. I actually didn’t know how some could pull together.”

Freddy Moran echoes Laura’s reaction to the challenge. “We are all artists. We should feel proud that we could create these beautiful quilts from all those Spool blocks having such diverse styles.”

Some of the blocks touched their hearts. Gai Perry’s contribution was a hand-drawn Spool block because her failing eyesight rules out sewing. Karen Flamme’s was the first quilting project she tackled following a major illness. Other blocks were unmistakably their creator’s work. Laura’s observation that “Their personalities shined through their blocks” is apt as she points to a spool wrapped in color-changing thread

from Paula Nadelstern. Freddy Moran’s creative partner and co-author, Gwen Marston, sent a Star instead of a Spool; her act of creative independence elicited chuckles from the team.

Diana’s take on the anniversary project reflects her view of quilting as a shared experience—the very best reason to choose the Empty Spools Seminars. “These celebration quilts show us why we all need each other in our creative



pursuits. Together we can take our ideas further than when we work alone.”

Thousands of quilts have passed through Diana’s hands in a lifetime devoted to quiltmaking, but these new six are special. They represent 25 wonderful years shared with people who wholeheartedly embrace their creativity—just the way Diana had hoped when she, Gayle, and Suzanne created the ultimate seaside quilters’ retreat. **TQL**



“She grew me”

Alex credits Diana as her mentor. “She is all about education. She took a personal interest in making sure that I got a thorough quilting education because education is the heart of the quilting community.”

“Despite our different tastes, traditional or art quilts, we can all get along. No quilter has to apologize for what she or he wants to do,” Diana says as she sets out to empower a whole new generation of quilters.



Diana McClun