



Working All the Angles – Design, History, Arts & Geometry!

By Roger Smith

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“Thanks for getting me out of math class.” This expression of gratitude came from a student who was unwittingly using geometry to lay out a quilt design on two 4’ x 8’ sheets of plywood. I was observing her and her classmates as they participated in an arts residency designed by the Perry County Council of the Arts (PCCA) in cooperation with her school’s history, math and art teachers. PCCA’s multi-disciplinary Quilt-Barn Project established quilter Denise Hoke as an artist-in-residence in her high school for ten days.

In the past few years, Ms. Hoke has worked with history, math and art students in five Central PA school districts. A local historian kicked off each residency by meeting with students in their history classes and presenting them with an array of events and movements that had occurred within their school districts over 300



years. Ms. Hoke enriched this historical stew with a short-course about the history of quilting, the many styles of quilts, and the meaning behind the styles.

Building upon their new knowledge, the students created 2’ x 2’ quilt prototypes that paid deference to the past through shape, placement and color. Then the action moved to the art room.

Using now quite relevant geometry skills, students



enlarged the patterns onto sheets of plywood, laying out and painting their 8’ x 8’ designs. The quilts were then hung on the sides of local barns within sight of highways in their school districts.

During the Quilt-Barn Project, students learned local history and practiced geometry through a unique, stimulating enterprise. Perhaps just as important, they learned how their efforts can have a positive effect on their community. In this case, the 13 quilts created by the students are now part of a Quilt-Barn Trail that boasts 18 quilts within sight of local roadways. As a whole, the Quilt-Barns have injected a sense of artistic exuberance into our rural landscape, reinforced a positive sense of cultural identity and historical significance, and have even become a modest economic engine. Numerous groups and individuals have driven the entire trail, and along the way they have patronized ice cream parlors, antique shops, gas stations, and restaurants.

Now back to our young student... I had never met her before. Perhaps she was a kid who simply didn’t like geometry, or maybe her antipathy toward school was more profound. But innovative programs like the Quilt-Barn Project have assisted in keeping our kids engaged and productive in school, learning in ways that are not frequently a part of the traditional school paradigm, and connecting them to their community.

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www.perrycountyarts.org | The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts (PCA) works with experienced regional partners to foster participation in the creative process in schools and community settings. The Perry County Council of the Arts is one of 13 Arts in Education (AIE) Partners that recruit, select, train, place, and evaluate professional teaching artists to work for extended periods of time in educational environments.