

Challenges create opportunities: Keeping SOQS strong

By Katy Yoder
Correspondent

Jean Wells knows a thing or two about starting, running, and nurturing a business.

She opened Stitches Post in 1975 and grew the quilting shop into a robust commercial success with a stellar reputation and national recognition. That same know-how fostered the birth and longevity of the Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show (SOQS) as an event, and eventually a well-managed nonprofit organization.

For many, quilting conjures up images of peaceful blocks of time creating quilts, sometimes alone and sometimes with friends. That may be true, but so is the reality of challenges and hurdles for an organization whose success can be a target for those who'd like to snatch a bit of those hard-won benefits for themselves. That's when years of experience and hard work come in handy.

Wells learned at an early age how to face tough situations.

"I watched my Dad do it as a crop duster," she recalled. "From his aviation background, he had the idea that when forest fires happened, you could use a modified military plane to spray the fire to put it out. He was the first person in the U.S. to develop a plane to do that. I remember when he flew home a Navy surplus plane that barely looked flyable. I watched the ups and downs and challenges in my dad's business, and learned that sometimes you have to punt, and that's normal."

Wells knows how to reassess and push through. As a business owner, she has reinvented Stitches Post several times in the past 45 years.

"When things begin to feel irrelevant, it's time innovate," she said. "I always believe in putting heads together; more opinions are better than one. That approach to adversity has served us well."

After each event, the SOQS board, including past executive directors, Ann Richardson, Jeanette Pilak, and current director, Dawn Boyd, have evaluated their successes and challenges. Their efforts and solution-oriented attitudes created a foundation that future organizers can work from.

SOQS has weathered storms, both literally and metaphorically.

Rain and wind are never an outdoor quilt show's friend. Planning for a rainy day is a must to ensure all the quilts hung throughout Sisters aren't damaged. Wells directed her staff to devise a contingency plan for all kinds of emergencies.

"If we didn't have a plan in place, it wouldn't go as smoothly," she said.

Over the years Quilt Rescue Teams, a group of stalwart and well-prepared volunteers, are on call to drive golf carts, vans and bikes wherever their services are needed. They carry tools including ladders, extra wire in case wiring breaks, masking tape, hammers, and safety pins. Every cart has orange buckets to carry tools easily to deal with whatever might come up. There is radio communication with an Oregon Department of Transportation command post and the City of Sisters because of street openings and closings. Volunteers wear bright, easily spotted shirts with Quilt Rescue Team in bold letters.

"We don't rescue quilters, just the quilts," said long-time volunteer and Quilt Rescue Team member, Clyde Dildine, with a laugh.

Another challenge has been the folks who have tried to steal some of the organization's hard-won thunder by slipstreaming off SOQS momentum and world-wide notoriety. A few years ago, Wells and her staff experienced just how determined some can be. They've dealt with organizations trying to start a Central Oregon quilt show the same day as SOQS. Wells said they came after her personally.

"I was actually frightened of these people. It went on for three or four years. He was trying to jump on our bandwagon and ride our coattails and it was extremely uncomfortable," she said. "There have been people who tried to take away what we were doing in one way or another. We have stood firm that we're a grassroots organization with day-to-day sharing and caring. That has done very well for us. We had to hire an attorney and write letters. We never thought we'd need legal help to protect our show."

It's not the only time organizations have tried

to profit from the SOQS' established reputation and loyal patrons.

"They wanted a piece of the action during quilt show day. That kind of diluted commerce hurt all the businesses in Sisters," Wells said. "Vendor issues came up with people outside the area trying to take a piece of the pie. The income that comes in that day should stay in the community and support business owners who are working hard to stay open during the winter and shoulder seasons. We are protective of our business sponsors and want them to be successful. We are grateful that council members supported us."

For Wells, it's the people and the connections people have through quilting that's really the inspiration for the show. Groups of people who met because of the show from different parts of the world, meet every year at the



PHOTO COURTESY SISTERS OUTDOOR QUILT SHOW

The virtual quilt show will include some of Freddy Moran's colorful, playful faces.

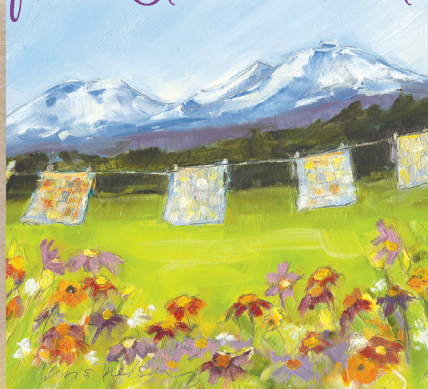
show. That's part of why the show has survived.

This year's SOQS team is showing how they can pivot in the face of adversity, this time created by a global pandemic.

SOQS has created a

virtual show that contains as much of the excitement and inspiration guests receive as they stroll through Sisters on Quilt Show day. It won't be the same, but SOQS will prevail and come back stronger than ever. It always does.

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