

An innovator in quilting and business

By Jodi Schneider
Correspondent

Entrepreneur Jean Wells Keenan has been an innovator in the quilting world for over four decades. Creating a business out of her passion, Keenan then took her talents as a teacher, artist, author, and quilt shop proprietor to another level.

It all began modestly in 1975, when Keenan, proprietor of the Stitchin' Post, and her friend Kathy Howell, another business owner nearby, decided to host a small summer fair in July and hang a few quilts outside near her shop. During that time the shop was located downstairs inside the Sisters Hotel on Cascade Avenue.

Keenan explained, "I had asked a few people that sewed to bring their quilts, but nobody seemed too interested. I had family quilts that I took from our cedar chest and hung them out with two of my own quilts. But then on that day some of the ladies I had invited brought their quilts after realizing it was just a sharing and caring type of day. So, it became an annual tradition."

For 45 years the sharing and caring has continued — and grown. Every second Saturday in July the entire town of Sisters is wrapped in walls of bright colors for the annual Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show (SOQS) where you can find over a thousand handcrafted vibrant quilts, all a colorful exploration of patterned artistry pieced together that tell a story.

Born and raised in Redmond, Keenan is proud to be a fourth-generation Oregonian. Her father, the late legendary Cal Butler, founded Butler Aircraft in Redmond.

Keenan told *The Nugget*, "As I've aged, I find myself thinking of my dad. I spent a lot of time with him in his later years. He was passionate about airplanes and about his work and I know that's what drove him to be a success."

Butler learned to fly in Redmond when he was 15. An inventor of agricultural aviation equipment who flew in World War II, he supported the use of air tankers in fighting wildfires and played an active role in developing the Redmond Airport.

She added, "He was brought up by his mom as a single parent because his dad,

a pharmacist who was helping the doctors deliver medicine, died of the Spanish flu during the 1918 pandemic.

"When my dad came back from the war, he started a crop-dusting business and he was always inventing mechanisms, like a rotary spray nozzle and a closed chemical loading system, to improve pilot safety and the performance of airplanes," she said.

"I was in the 7th grade when he bought a navy surplus airplane, and I remember as a family we all went out to the airport to see this bigger plane and it looked like a pile of junk. But my dad figured out how to turn it into the first tanker in the U.S. that was used to put out wildfires."

In 1991, Butler was inducted into the National Agricultural Aviation Hall of Fame for his contributions to the field.

Keenan's mother kept the books for her husband and didn't have any interest in sewing at all.

Keenan noted, "I wanted to sew clothing so bad, but my mom didn't like the idea. However, my grandmother sewed. So, when I was nine years old my mom finally said that my grandmother could teach me how to sew."

What a difference a grandmother can make in a child's life. Thus, the seeds were planted...

"As soon as I had baby-sitting money I went out and bought my own fabric from Roberts in Redmond," she said. "Mom didn't want me to make my own clothes until I took home ec in school, but I snuck and made a few skirts anyway."

By the time Keenan was 15 years old she was sewing Western shirts so her sisters would look their best at horse shows.

"As a family we went to so many horse shows since my younger sisters June and Judy loved horses. And in my mind, I was sure they got their blue ribbons because of my sewing!" Keenan said, laughing.

Keenan had a love affair with fabric by making it her own.

"Once I learned how to make patterns, I would always change something up in the pattern to make it my own design," she said. "I went to Oregon State and majored in Home Economics and during my freshman year, I

was taking a sewing class and we all had to make the same dress. But I put a little trim on each side of the band, and I got a B instead of an A because I personalized my project."

A teacher at heart, Keenan is an artist who loves to give by connecting with people as an instructor. She taught home economics for eight years in Beaverton before moving to Sisters.

She noted, "There weren't any home ec teaching jobs in this area, and I wanted to continue my classes in Central Oregon."

Keenan taught home economics for Central Oregon Community College in 1975 and had 25 students who wanted to take a patchwork class in Sisters.

"My friend, Pat, who owned a store in Portland, where I was getting all the cotton fabric for my students, one day finally said, 'Well, Jean, you just need to open a store.'"

She added, "I had never even had a retail type job before, but I took all of the money out of my retirement and opened the Stitchin' Post. I just did it by the seat of my pants. I really didn't know what I was doing."

Keenan rented out an area downstairs in the Sisters Hotel that is now the bar in Sisters Saloon. She found vintage wooden Coca Cola cartons and painted them and put her thread in them.

Patrons could find fabric remnants in heirloom chest of drawers and in restored trunks.

"I didn't want my shop to look like other department stores," she said.

Keenan's daughter, Valori Wells, was only a toddler and remembers spending a lot of time in Stitchin' Post.

Wells said, "I had some of my first concrete memories being in that shop, especially when I was in kindergarten. I remember helping customers and learning how to count change at a really young age. It was just part of my life, that's what we did. Fabric and textiles are intertwined into who I am. Growing up in the shop gave me an education about business that I didn't realize I was getting."

Keenan added, "I never forced a sewing career on Valori. It was in the 7th grade when she became interested in photography. They had a dark room at the school, and she fell in love with it."

"Being given that opportunity to pursue any dream I had, which was in the art field, I studied photography at a school in Portland," Wells said. "I had to find my own path back into the shop and I did. After nearly four years at school, mom asked me to help with photography



PHOTO BY HELEN SCHMIDLING

for her book. That opened the door to allowing me to find my artistic vision within our industry and within our shop."

Wells, now co-owner of Stitchin' Post, manages the business while Keenan can settle back spending more time creating art and gardening.

Keenan is an author with 30 quilting books under her belt and has received many honors over the years. In 1997 she was inducted into the Primedia Independent Retailers Hall of Fame, and in 1998 she received the Michael Kile Award for lifetime achievement honoring commitment to creativity and excellence in the quilting industry. In 1999 the Sisters Area Chamber of Commerce honored Stitchin' Post with Business of the Year. She received "Citizen of the Year" award in 2007 and was inducted into the Quilters Hall of Fame in 2010.

Keenan sums up her "formula" succinctly: "I think it's all about my passion for what I do that has helped me to become a success."



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