



*Shelly Stokes "retired" and then became an artist, quilter, author, entrepreneur, educator, and world traveler. She has shared her award-winning designs with hundreds of other artists and used her business expertise to help lift African women out of poverty.*

# A dyeing art enlivens new world ventures

By Marjorie Van Gorp | Photography by Lisa Hurlen

**Shelly Stokes took a journey into fiber artistry through computer science and award-winning quilts. She launched her own company, wrote books, and built lasting friendships while connecting with women across the world.**

The skills and training required for computer science professionals seem worlds apart from the talents it takes to become a fabric designer. Fiber optics and fiber arts don't usually occupy the same curriculum much less the same board room.

Shelly Stokes came out of the city and into Africa for a profound connection from her home in the rural Miliona, Minnesota, where she owns and operates Cedar Canyon Textiles.

She feared she might be exchanging big city corporate ideals for winter boredom in central Minnesota lake country. She set that fear aside and followed her husband into early retirement in 1995. After 13 years in computer programming and quality control systems management, she began a new life in a different world.

She ventured into quilting and became fascinated with fabrics. While experimenting with color and texture, she taught classes and learned to dye fabric. She quickly accumulated too much fabric for her own use so she started a retail business.

While exploring various methods in designing, she discovered a coloring technique which led her into a new world.

## Early Motivation

Shelly grew up as the middle sibling which probably helped set the stage for her ability to recognize opportunities and meet challenges. Her parents instilled high educational expectations for Shelly and her sisters. They were encouraged to select college studies they liked as well as to earn degrees that would provide good career opportunities.

She majored in computer science and earned a bachelor's degree from Moorhead State University. With the growing use of computers in business, jobs were plentiful for new college graduates. She was hired

as a computer programmer with Unisys in the Twin Cities and over the next 13 years, she advanced to quality control systems manager.

In the mid-1990s, Shelly and her husband, Jack, moved from the hustle of the cities to a secluded life on a small acreage near Miliona in west central Minnesota. Spending long winter nights snowbound did not fit her ideal vision of country life.

She needed a challenge to fill the time once occupied with corporate business and long work days.

When her sister suggested quilting, Shelly enrolled in Community Education classes and took a part-time job at B's Fabrics where she got an on-the-job education in retail experience. She loved the surroundings of colorful fabrics and tantalizing textures.

Quilting became her security blanket, favorite hobby, and best relaxation technique. She immersed herself into her new-found passion, joined a quilting group, and built her skills and expertise.

On a visit to her sister, she spotted a book called *Hand Dyed Fabrics Made Easy* and was off on a new venture. She began with a limited palette of dyes: two reds, two blues, two yellows, a black and a brown. She soon had a new obsession.

Learning the dyeing process gave her an incredible education in color and fabric. She experimented with surface design and created her own fabrics. She attended quilt shows as an exhibitor as well as a vendor.

Her dyed fabrics became so popular, she formed a company, Cedar Canyon Textiles. This hobby-turned-business brought her husband out of retirement to become vice president in charge of shipping and receiving. He also helped with dyeing operations while Shelly taught classes and served as company president.

She expanded her creations and began producing original textured fabrics from scraps. Shelly's need for continued learning brought her to painting on fabric and into another new world.

## More Challenges

An ad in a fiber art magazine piqued her interest and Shelly became intrigued with paint sticks. These oil-based paints resemble oversized crayons and can be used on a wide variety of surfaces including fabric.

She started using them in her designs and adding the concept to the classes she taught. Many of her students and other crafters recognized their possibilities and were eager to learn more about paint sticks.

Shelly soon realized the need to expand her class offerings to include instruction materials specific to the Shiva® Artist's Paintstiks® line of products she used in her designs.

She wrote *Paintstiks on Fabric* in 2005 and it was published as an informational and instructional book. She became an official distributor of the product line of Paintstiks® as well.

Painting and designing with this new medium soon took over her life and dominated her business. She closed out the hand-dyed fabrics portion of her work and limited trade show activities to demonstrations.

Within a year, she added the design of rubbing plates and quilting stencils as templates used in the design process.

As the business took over more and more space in their home, she and Jack purchased a building in 2008 and remodeled it to meet their growing business needs.

In 2010, she published a second book, *Design Magic*, featuring her original designs and instructions.

Her talents and expertise as an exhibitor and demonstrator have earned significant awards. With her first try at using paint sticks in a project, she won first place honors at the 2002 Minnesota Quilt Show and again at the National Quilt Show in Paducah, Kentucky.

For Shelly, those honors became secondary to the greater reward of building new friendships. When she met quilter and designer Rosemary Wittink of Fall Creek, Wisconsin, Shelly's world expanded even more.

Shelly became fascinated with Rosemary's dedication to helping impoverished women around the world. A project called Amani Ya Juu trains women in Africa to build marketable skills helping them break out of poverty.

Rosemary invited Shelly along on her next overseas trip. During the journey, a strong bond developed between the two of them. The experience allowed Shelly to combine two of her favorite activities: teaching and traveling.

## Latest Ventures

Travel to Africa had not been an item on Shelly's bucket list until Rosemary told her about Amani Ya Juu in Kenya and other countries. The program teaches skills in sewing, marketing and business operations to marginalized women in Africa and is staffed mainly by volunteers.

Meaning "higher peace" in Swahili, Amani Ya Juu has a two-fold purpose. It gives impoverished women the opportunity to improve their sewing skills while building their marketing and business skills. They gain experience in purchasing, bookkeeping, quality control, management and design.

Shelly was hooked on the idea almost immediately because it blended her business experience and her artistry.

In March 2006, she and three other women including her new friend Rosemary headed for Nairobi. They taught the African women how to use paint sticks to embellish their fabrics.

On previous trips, Rosemary had taken along some small, portable sewing machines for the African women. They soon discovered those small machines could not handle the heavy stitching sometimes required in their local production methods.

Shelly and Rosemary explored downtown Nairobi searching for local sewing machines that would handle the work. They found a machine heavier than a typical domestic one yet less intimidating or complicated than an industrial model.

To help procure these sewing machines for the Amani project, she and Rosemary established an Adopt-a-Machine program. They raised funds to purchase machines in Nairobi which in turn helped support the local economy and provided a local supply line for machine parts.

In addition to sewing and marketing skills, the American women are able to share social time and bonding with their African counterparts. The women who receive these benefits at the Amani Ya Juu program in Africa are amazed that others from around the world care enough to support the mission.

Participating in that program has had a profound impact on Shelly. She has experienced life-changing benefits and a new perspective by working with these poverty-stricken women who are trying to improve their lives. She came away with a greater appreciation for the daily freedoms and the comparative wealth women enjoy in this country.

Back home, another new adventure unfolded for Shelly as she continued to expand her business. She was offered the opportunity to appear on several segments of *Quilting Arts TV*.

She learned the intricacies of making a television series including exactly how much information can be packed into three or four minutes of air time and just how quickly a person can change clothes for the next segment.

Shelly knows that her traveling and volunteer work wouldn't be possible without the support of her team at Cedar Canyon Textiles.

Her assistant, Leanne Mills, gets everything in and out the door, keeps her on schedule, and runs a smooth operation in Shelly's absence. Having an assistant also allowed Jack, her husband, to retire again after the company moved into its new building.

Shelly has inventory and packing assistance from Joan Ronning and help with travel and trade shows from Mary Brandt.

Graphic artist Matthew Mills designs stencils, catalogs, ads, and packaging as an independent contractor.

Even though Shelly was a computer guru in her previous corporate life, she is more than happy to turn over the webmaster duties to Carol Logan Newbill, another independent contractor.

One of the most significant local partnerships for Cedar Canyon Textiles is with Alexandria Opportunities Center, a sheltered workshop whose employees help package products for shipping.

Shelly knows one of the most important things we can do is reach out and support others less fortunate. It engages the heart and the soul.

She cautions other entrepreneurs: Building a business that sells products you create consumes you. And she quickly adds: It will be a positive and significantly rewarding journey into new worlds. *DW*

*Marjorie Van Gorp is a contributing editor for Definitive Woman Magazine.*

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