The Nia Quilters of Pittsburgh: Creating a Difference in Gee's Bend

Gee's Bend, Alabama, lies in a horseshoe-shaped area of land formed by a massive turn in the Alabama River. It is an isolated, rural community populated by African Americans who choose to make their living on the same land upon which their ancestors toiled before the Civil War. Despite its recent international acclaim, many still have never heard of it, but those who recognize the name know Gee's Bend is highly respected for its community of historic quilt makers.

Some 800 miles north in Pittsburgh, members of the Nia Quilt Guild are well aware of the exquisite quilts handmade in Gee's Bend. Janice Parks, guild facilitator and director of the Young Men and Women's African American Heritage Association, has led an annual pilgrimage to the community for three years. “It’s a lot like camping,” said Parks of the trip to Gee’s Bend to explore history, an experience that she calls “cultural immersion.”

The next spring when Pettway went “home,” Parks joined her and met with people at her church, where she learned, “all the business got done.” Her enthusiastic proposal was not met with immediate success. The Gee’s Bend community was tired of strangers coming in. There had been bitter disputes over land and more recently over quilts—their ownership and value—many of these legal issues grabbing national headlines.

“The Nia Quilt Guild is not coming to take anything from you,” Parks assured them, eventually prevailing through kindness and resolve. She told them: “We’ll eat what you eat, and we’ll sleep where you sleep.” And when the business got done: “We didn’t even know enough to be excited,” said Parks. “We didn’t know what we’d pulled off!”

Until that day, no quilting outsiders had successfully negotiated arrangements to live among the Gee’s Bend residents. The Gee’s Bend citizens follow the ways of their ancestry; the way of the Gullah/Geechee nations and the Amish, the Native Americans and other close-knit societies. Someone had to be responsible for you. And it was then that Janice Parks became “adopted” and formed relationships that have lasted many years.
“We plan a trip to Gee’s Bend the way others might plan a trip out of the country,” said Parks. “We bring all of the things we know we’ll need. There are no stores nearby.” No, not even a Wal-Mart.

During their first trip in 2006, the core group included Joyce Broadus, head librarian for the Hill District Carnegie; Agnes Sloan, a retired transportation manager; Parks herself; and her granddaughter, Asia Stewart. They found paved roads that morphed into red clay, humble homes teetering on stacks of brick, and antiquated utilities (when available).

Parks wasn’t discouraged. “I looked at it like a trip to the original 13 colonies. Gee’s Bend was my Middle Passage. In fact, it made a trip I took to Africa make a lot more sense.”

In Gee’s Bend, she saw a small village; people who were still living, in many ways, a life many African Americans had fled during the Great Migration of the 1930s—leaving the South and places like Gee’s Bend in search of expanded freedoms and job opportunities in the North. Even so, it was a strong, proud village, one to which Parks and the Nia Quilters quickly adapted. They moved into one of the extended family homes of Gee’s Bend resident, Bettie Bendolph Seltzer, who became their guide, mentor, and friend. The main portion of each day they devoted to quilting at a newly built facility the Gee’s Bend women call “The Collective.”

What made a day at the Collective unique for the Nia Quilters was the joy of having the Gee’s Bend women work shoulder-to-shoulder with them five days a week throughout the quilting process. Rita Pettway, Bettie Bendolph, and other members would assist in sewing blocks for individual Nia members and often stripped their own work from the two main quilt frames always in use at the building, to set-up a quilting bee with the visiting Pittsburgh guild. Soon the women of Allegheny County and Wilcox Country were gathered with their threaded needles, quilting, talking, laughing, and sometimes singing.

Members of the collective have spent a lot of personal time with the Nia Guild, something Parks sees as one of many gifts these women have given them. The relationship with the Gee’s Bend and Nia quilters remains on good terms because Parks sticks by her original rules. “We don’t misuse or misappropriate their name. We treat them like family, and we give back to the community.”

Parks and her group have left behind enough funds to make repairs on the house they rent during their summers at Gee’s Bend and to buy quilting equipment for the Collective as well as fabric and batting. The Guild also pays the women who work with them. Often other organizations (even major ones) invite the Quilters of Gee’s Bend out of town for exhibitions, feed them and house them, but don’t pay them. “They are professional artists,” said Parks, annoyed by these tactics. “They deserve to be, and should be paid!”

Since that first trip, the number of people making the sojourn to Gee’s Bend from Pittsburgh has steadily grown. Currently the project can comfortably
“Often when I make my own quilts, I do so to figure things out and reach resolution,” said Parks. She is now working on a grant to bring members of the Gee’s Bend Collective to Pittsburgh in fall 2010. Parks hopes one day to retire to the community, where she has found a second home and where she and others have learned lessons that are a metaphor for life. “The women of Gee’s Bend have taught us that it’s okay to make mistakes,” reflected Parks. “You don’t have to undo a stitch to move ahead. It is in the whole of the quilt that you see the true beauty.”

Work by the Nia Quilters created at Gee’s Bend will be exhibited at the Quilters Weekend January 23 and 24 at the History Center. Call (412) 454-6000 for general information.

Christine McCray Bethea is a mixed-media artist, whose work in African American quiltmaking has been archived with the History Center. She is currently a consultant and the curator of ARTica, a gallery in the Friendship/Garfield community.