

R.I. quilter in select company

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Patricia Harrison, of Exeter, recently was certified by the National Quilting Association to judge quilt shows.



Patricia Harrison is a judge. She doesn't wear a robe when she's working, but she does wear white gloves.

She is Rhode Island's first and only nationally certified quilt judge.

There are only 76 in the country. Not every state has one. All of New England has only four, and the other three are in Massachusetts.

Only four were certified this year — Harrison among them — by the National Quilting Association, an organization of 5,500 members based in Columbus, Ohio.

Harrison understates the significance of her work:

“Our basic job is to hand out the ribbons.”

Never mind the material she has mastered, or the quilt shows she has helped judge, the classes she's taken and lectures she's attended, or the hundreds of quilts she has quilted, for herself and others, on her long-arm machine.

Harrison, who lives with her husband, Robert, on Reuben Brown Lane in Exeter, began thinking about getting certified about eight years ago, a couple of years before she retired from her job as librarian at Narragansett Elementary School. The process is arduous. Applicants have five years to research and write what amounts to their own textbook on quilting. They get two chances to submit the paper and have it accepted. They must also be tested by a panel of three judges and win their approval.

“I had heard they would try to throw you a curve,” she said about the mock judging where her own abilities as a judge were scrutinized. Some of her evaluators started to act silly. She knew she would be graded on how she corrected them.

In a world where an artist can work years on a single piece, a judge worth her scraps knows how to convey criticism constructively so the recipient is encouraged.

Quilt judges are hired by whoever is putting on the show. As an employee of the show's producers, the judge is told what system to use, whether the Vermont system of assigning points for each element of quilt design, construction and execution, or the elimination method, in which contestants are eliminated one by one until only the best are left.

"You can't judge a local show by national standards," Harrison said. "You've got to look at where the group is. You've got to find the cream of the crop, based on everything that's there."

She prefers deciding the winners by looking at her comments rather than by assigning points. "The comments are more valuable because they're going to give the quilter more direction," she said. When the point system is used, "Some people compare numbers and don't get anything more than confused."

Harrison and two other women judged the quilts at the Washington County Fair.

Harrison overheard one of the quilters say how glad he was that the judges had left comments. He said he has won before, but didn't know why.

A judge considers "how well it was done, not how it was done," she says.

. Lately, Harrison has been making quilts from whole cloth. Patchwork and crazy quilts consist of many scraps of fabric sewn into a design for the quilt top. A whole-cloth quilt is one piece of fabric decorated only by the lines and curves and swirls of the quilting stitches that attach it to the backing fabric. Batting between the front and back fabric causes the shapes to puff softly.

"There might be some extra batting added to give it some loft," she said.

An example of one of her whole-cloth quilts can be seen by visiting community.webshots.com/user/owqc1 and clicking on Quilts 2007 and then enlarging the plain pink one.

Harrison has recently launched her own Web site, www.oceanwavesqc.com.

The only U.S. quilting organization that certifies judges is the National Quilting Association. Its Web site is www.nqaquilts.org/

The other national quilting organization is the American Quilter's Society. That organization, based in Paducah, Ky., certifies quilt appraisers. Its Web site is www.americanquilter.com/

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