

# Weaving Past & Present

## AT BERRY COLLEGE

by Gussie Fautleroy

In the early 1900s an old log cabin known as Sunshine Shanty sat on a large parcel of wooded land near Rome, Georgia. Two days a week, teenaged girls attending Berry School sat at looms in the cabin, weaving hand towels and other useful items. The young weavers were part of the school's mandatory work program, which put every student's hands to utilitarian labor—balanced by academic classes four days a week—to offset the cost of their education and to train them in practical skills.

Berry School was founded in 1902 by Martha Berry, the compassionate daughter of a prosperous local business owner. Berry initially established an industrial boarding school for boys on property she inherited from her father. She wanted to provide an educational opportunity to help boost children of rural north Georgia families out of poverty. When a girls' school was added in 1909, the work program extended to them and the school's long relationship with weaving began.

For almost 100 years, as Berry went from high school level to a co-educational college nationally acclaimed for its work-experience program, weaving remained among the most longstanding occupational traditions on campus. It generated income through the sale of woven products while offering students a creative skill. It also helped maintain the north Georgian heritage of weaving as a traditional Appalachian craft. Although the work program became voluntary beginning in the 1960s—students now are paid instead of receiving credit toward their schooling—the number of Berry students involved in on-campus occupations has remained extraordinarily high. With a current undergraduate population of around 2,000, more than 95 percent of students participate in the work experience program during their time at Berry.

In 2003, economic conditions and other factors resulted in Berry eliminating weaving as one of its on-campus occupational choices. Many alumnae who learned to weave as students, including Joy Padgett Johnson of the class of 1973, were saddened at the loss of what they considered an important student opportunity and a vital connection with the region's weaving tradition. "I understood a lot of the reasons for it," Johnson says. "But I and other alumnae had strong feelings about the weaving program. We asked ourselves what could be a compromise, what could we do to maintain a weaving presence at Berry without being an economic drain on the college."



**Top:** Berry alumna Joy Johnson assists student Jamie Jones in removing her first handwoven product during training.

**Bottom:** Captured in the new weaving studio, Berry alumnae and students smile after a successful campus work day.



**Student Amanda Marbut with alumna Suzanne Anderson and student Jenny Smolek, looking for a threading error.**



**Student and Chief Executive Officer Amanda Marbut helps former Berry weaver Betty Briggs refresh her skills.**

The result, in place since 2010, involves alumnae weavers who volunteer to mentor students who've chosen weaving as their on-campus work. Called Viking Creations, the initiative falls under the school's Student Enterprise program, in which students launch and run on-campus businesses with guidance from Berry's Campbell School of Business. Because the college at present does not have a fiber arts department or weaving courses as part of its academic offerings, the alumnae volunteers provide hands-on weaving training through the enterprise. Viking Creations student weavers, each working between 10 and 16 hours a week, produce such items as dish towels, coasters, table runners, placemats, bookmarks, baby blankets, scarves, and bracelets. The products are sold through Berry's Museum Gift Shop, at

the campus weaving studio, and online.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for students to have a different level of learning [about running a business] while getting work experience," Johnson said of the Student Enterprise program. During the 2015-16 school year as many as nine students, both male and female, learned to weave through the program. They were taught by five volunteer alumnae mentors. Only two of the students were art majors, the rest coming from a variety of other disciplines, and none of the students had experience in weaving before joining Viking Creations. Currently, the program's nine looms include a circa 1930s Colonial counterbalance loom from Berry's original work program, as well as newer ones. A Berry alumna and HGA member purchased and donated a new, portable Baby Wolf loom for the program.

Bringing a weaving presence back to Berry was a process that advanced in stages over several years. It involved intensive effort and collaboration between alumnae volunteers, the school's administration—which had changed since the original weaving work option was eliminated—the alumni association, Student Enterprise program and staff, and a growing network of interested parties. Initially Johnson contacted other alumnae to organize a short-term weaving project for the school's annual Alumni Work Week. Berry has a long tradition of former students returning to campus one week each year to contribute to the college, usually by engaging in the kinds of work they completed while students. The first Alumni Work Week weaving project took place in 2005 with assistance from Louise Mulinix, who graduated in 1940 when Berry was still a high school. From 1965 to 1986 Mulinix supervised Berry College's Handicrafts work program, including the weaving component.

Johnson and Mulinix pulled old looms from storage and set up the Sunshine Room, naming the new weaving space after the original log cabin. Weaving as part of Work Week continues today, with as many as twenty former student weavers returning each year to participate. At least eight alumnae who've woven as part of Alumni Work Week in recent years now own their own looms and weave at home, having returned to the craft as a result of their participation at Berry.

With that effort's success, Johnson and other alumnae, including weaver, HGA member, and retired educator Suzanne Anderson (class of 1972), approached the Student Enterprise program about establishing weaving as one of the program's student-run businesses. The enterprise, which became Viking Creations, would

expand the weaving presence at Berry by serving as an on-campus student work opportunity throughout the school year.

In 2008 the Berry Student Enterprise program sent out a call to students to gauge their interest in weaving as a work option. Seeking five committed students to help create a Student Enterprise business plan, they received 300 responses. “We were shocked that so many replied,” Johnson recalls. “I was unaware at the time of the level of interest among young people in fiber arts.” To whittle down the numbers, these students were sent a more detailed survey. Then Johnson and Anderson headed up a “weaving experience” on campus, setting up looms and other stations where, with guidance, students could try their hand at weaving small projects.

Eventually the alumnae team identified five dedicated students and together they produced a proposal for Viking Creations. Among the terms: the alumnae organizers would recruit five alumni volunteers willing to make a four-year mentoring commitment to the enterprise. Each volunteer donates eight hours a month coaching/mentoring students in weaving. Johnson, who lives a half-hour away in Cedartown, Georgia, agreed to be at the school weekly to ensure the program runs smoothly.

During the two-year planning process for establishing Viking Creations, Johnson and Anderson also reached out to other alumni by establishing the Berry Handicrafts Network, an online presence through Facebook, Shutterfly, and the school’s website. The network—of more than three hundred and still growing—connects former Berry student weavers and staff with each other, with other interested parties, and with ongoing events on campus. In addition, the team worked with the school’s alumni association to enlist assistance in organizing student field trips to weaving businesses in the region. All along they kept Berry College President Dr. Stephen Briggs, who encouraged their effort, informed of their progress.

Even after Viking Creations was accepted as a Student Enterprise, the alumnae’s work was not done. They needed \$20,000 to purchase equipment and restore the weaving studio—a goal the alumni association helped achieve. “We kept uncovering things that needed to be done. Every time we took a baby step we discovered another

### The Berry College Dogwood Pattern

For as long as Berry College’s weaving work program was in existence, student weavers produced tea towels by the dozens bearing a distinctive dogwood flower pattern. The woven inlay design, in soft pinks and greens, reflected the weavers’ connection with the beauty of the region and its southern Appalachian weaving heritage. Joy Padgett Johnson, who spearheaded re-establishment of the on-campus weaving work option, notes that once the weaving studio was up and running again many alumni, especially former Berry weavers, wanted to purchase items woven with traditional designs.

The dogwood pattern was Viking Creations’ response to this request. It is also a reaffirmation of the value of tradition as part of the school’s weaving work program. During the spring 2016 semester, Viking Creations asked noted tapestry weaver Tommye McClure Scanlin of Dahlonega, Georgia, to lead an afternoon workshop on inlay weaving to get the students started. Now the pattern, synonymous with Berry College weavers for almost 100 years, has returned to the school’s weaving studio. Adorning new and vintage tea towels, the dogwood design’s first warp was pre-sold before it was off the loom, and consecutive editions have also sold well, Johnson says. “That pattern has been consistent for the entire history of Berry weaving. It looks just like it would have 70 years ago.”



The beautiful inlay Dogwood design is one of Berry College weaving’s oldest and has remained virtually unchanged. The 2016 pattern was created from vintage linens.

## Links

Berry Student Enterprise Viking Creations.  
From this link you can also find the Student  
Facebook link and shopping site.  
[www.berry.edu/studententerprises/  
vikingcreations/](http://www.berry.edu/studententerprises/vikingcreations/)

Berry Weaving Facebook page  
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Weaving-162834757130129/](https://www.facebook.com/Berry-Weaving-162834757130129/)

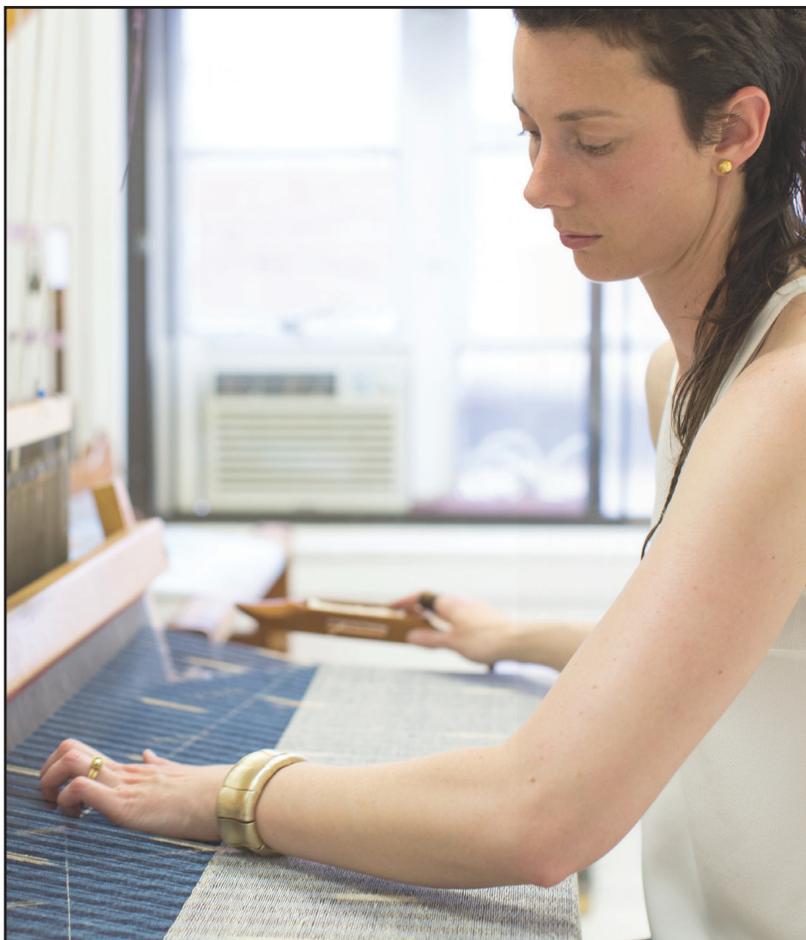
Handicrafts Network Shutterfly Photo Site  
[handicraftsalumni.shutterfly.com/](http://handicraftsalumni.shutterfly.com/)

Berry College Alumni Network Site  
[www.berry.edu/alumni/handicrafts/](http://www.berry.edu/alumni/handicrafts/)

big step we needed to take,” Johnson says. “This whole thing could not have been done without the incredible collaboration of alumni weavers and the interest and encouragement from the administration and faculty. It was a giant partnership that just kept growing.”

The Viking Creations weaving enterprise benefits Berry College by adding to its work program options and enhancing its reputation as an institution strongly committed to combining work experience with education. It also provides an enjoyable way for former student weavers to re-engage with and give back to their alma mater, Johnson says. Alumna Suzanne Anderson notes that her involvement in establishing Viking Creations “helped expand my weaving knowledge, but most of all it gave me a wonderful sense of satisfaction in helping today’s youth learn, appreciate, and perpetuate this craft/art.” The experience also motivated Anderson to start her own small weaving business at home.

And of course, the students themselves gain valuable experience and lifelong skills. “It teaches them not just to weave, but also [to pay] attention to detail and [to develop] a sense of responsibility—all things that transfer to being a good worker,” Johnson says. Jenny Smolek of Saint Mary’s City, Maryland, (class of 2012) was among the first students to take part in Viking Creations. In a note to Johnson following graduation, Smolek expressed her immense gratitude for “introducing me to the wonderful world of weaving and the amazing women who have gone before as Berry weavers.” She added that the alumnae volunteers “have shown me that a common interest can hold together a group of people in a way that stands the test of time and space.”



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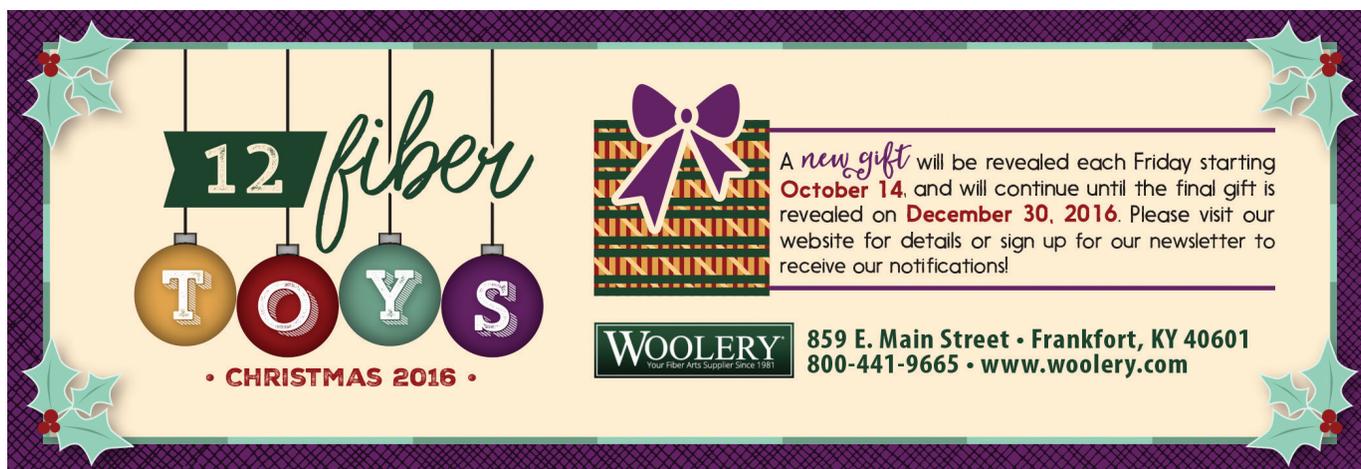
Indeed, students involved when weaving was being reintroduced to Berry had a front-row seat on the work of gathering ideas and support from many directions to bring the program to life. "It took perseverance, sticking together, and not taking no for an answer. It worked, and those students saw that," Johnson says. Then she laughs and adds, "I'd rather be called tenacious, but I get called a bulldog sometimes." Yet willingness to invest in the long term is essential in any community collaborative project, Johnson says. "Be sure you have the time for an in-depth commitment. Also, be very open minded with the organizations you collaborate with, because that's been the key to the success of this program—the interest and encouragement of Berry College administrators and staff."

A dream of Johnson and other former Berry weavers is that one day the school will have a fiber arts program among its academic offerings. Administrators and members of the Berry College Art Department faculty have expressed interest in such a possibility while acknowledging that it is a long-term goal. "They appreciate that I try hard to understand them and how complicated it is sometimes for a large organization to get things done," Johnson says. "You have to respect that." The respect goes both ways. In a note to Johnson complimenting a Viking Creations' necktie made with handwoven fabric, President Stephen Briggs praised the alumnae, staff, and students' ongoing efforts. "I appreciate the way Viking Creations keeps working to improve its products and business plan," Briggs wrote. "Worthwhile work done well!"

*If you have a story about a guild and community collaboration that you would like to share, please contact us at [Editor@WeaveSpinDye.org](mailto:Editor@WeaveSpinDye.org).*

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*Photography by Joy Padgett Johnson.*



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