

Peggy Heddleson – an artist and more
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on April 26, 2011)

Deb Schenk continues her interpretation of Peggy Heddleson's banner art.

"When Peggy Heddleson listed her reasons for making art the first two were 'to understand the madness' and 'to let the inside voice speak.' Peggy made many banners designed to express and, perhaps, channel, the emotional and physical pain she experienced during her life. After she had learned to manage her own painful memories, she created banners that demonstrated a passionate understanding of the pain experienced by others.

"As a child, Peggy had an accident involving a wooden swing, causing her to permanently lose several front teeth. As we can all easily imagine, this would be a cause of great self-conscious awkwardness well after the actual pain wore off. While still in high school, a tumor and the subsequent surgery left her unable to bear children. Peggy and her first husband adopted three children.

"When Peggy's first marriage of 23 years failed, she found herself in Oak Ridge, far from family and life-long friends where she grew up in Minnesota. 'The emotional pain I went through surviving a broken marriage cannot be described,' she explains. The loneliness of being far from home and help with three children to care for only made matters more depressing.

"Next to the image of a banner inscribed 'Pain is when it hurts' Peggy wrote 'the journey begins.' The letters are sharp edged and jumbled in shades of pink, red, and orange. The edges of the banner are jagged. Beneath the words the banner is cut into ragged strips, looking as though it has been torn or even clawed at. The viewer can feel Peggy's anguish along with her effort to externalize the pain into the banner.

"Peggy describes how in the 1960's and 70's feminist groups would stencil 'rape circles' onto sidewalks near where women had been raped. When she first saw one, she was so moved that she photographed it. Later, she memorialized the marker as a banner. Red poppies on a deeper red background surround a circle containing the words 'A woman was raped here.'

"Through her art, Peggy came into contact with a number of women who had been raped. She was clearly glad to have been able to minister to some of these women and, hopefully, help them on their path to cope with their pain.

"Peggy made banners geared toward addressing all sorts of sources of pain in the lives of people: abuse, oppression, hate, racism, discrimination, war, and disease. Though I'm certain she would have liked to solve all of these issues, her emphasis seems to be upon finding a method to cope with the pain on an individual level.

"Peggy found her own answer in a simple banner marked "do ye next thing," which she ascribes as an old Quaker quote. Across the dark background march brightly colored foot prints made from a tracing of her own feet. Peggy writes, 'All any of us can do is survive and progress in short steps.'

"Peggy's banners are an amazing collection of windows into her thoughts. They are not only beautiful, but thought provoking. May we all be fortunate enough that our creations should have such a lasting and powerful impact.

That concludes Deb Schenk's three articles on Peggy Heddleson and her banners.

Peggy Heddleson not only made banners that reflected her deep religious convictions and her relationship with God, in her most unique and highly unusual artistic ability, she used the banners to communicate very personal ideas, thoughts and insights into life as she saw it. Her uncanny ability to convey broad concepts and ideals through revealing intimate details of her singular thoughtful mind made these very personal banner messages treasures for Fred and the rest of her family as well as blessings for us.

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She used the banners to sooth her own hurts, add understanding to the hurts of others and to send not so subtle messages to those whose minds might be a bit more closed than she thought was healthy. Kindly, she challenged us all to understand life as she knew it. Peggy is missed by all who knew her, but most of all she is missed by Fred and the rest of her family. Her banners are now divided among the family and each one has special banners that carry the memory of Peggy to the coming generations.

I hope you have enjoyed this series on Peggy Heddleson and her banners. My thanks goes to Deb Schenk for her outstanding interpretation of the art and the woman, Peg Heddleson.

Let me add two additional quotes regarding Peggy Heddleson and acknowledge yet another aspect of her art, her work with the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. The more I learn about this marvelous lady, the more impressed I am with her varied and multiple talents.

Selma Shapiro, past and long time Director of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, said, "Peggy Heddleson, from the earliest days, starting in 1973, made a major contribution to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge with her time, talent, and skills." Viola Ergen happened to be visiting Selma and she added that, "Peggy had a knack for taking objects and putting them together, and arranging them so that they came alive. She was a very talented artist."

These last two quotes were obtained by Margaret Allard and reflect a part of Peggy's life that Deb could not have known from her exposure to only Peggy's banners. If you knew Peggy, you surely must appreciate that Deb and I have captured only a small portion of the woman that was Peggy Heddleson, yet even that small glimpse shows an amazingly talented lady. Thanks for remembering her with Fred and thanks again to Deb Shanks and Margaret Allard.

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A woman was raped here – Peggy's attempt to help victims cope with this horrible enduring pain

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Peggy Heddleson with one of her banners

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“Do Ye Next Thing” – a great message from Peggy for us to do what life asks of us one “thing” at a time, taken from an old Quaker quote.