

Maureen and Michael Banner

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

AS TOLD TO DAVID PAUL BACHARACH (BY MAUREEN [MO] AND MICHAEL BANNER)

Mo sat cross-legged on the gravel drive-way of their modest first home in the Berkshires of Massachusetts.

“Have we heard from the Post Office yet?” she inquired tentatively.

“Yes,” Michael said from under the car. “What did they say?”

“We both passed,” he replied, as he unscrewed the oil plug before pulling it away from the streaming oil.

“If we have to deliver mail,” Mo stated quietly, “at least we can pay the bills.”

A long silence followed while Michael groped for his wrench.

“We need to design different work,”

Mo muttered, thinking out loud.

Oil and sweat dripped down Michael’s bare arms. He wiped the drain plug and tried to remember where he had put the new gasket. “The jewelry we sold in Glencoe isn’t selling here,” he stated flatly.

Mo, ignoring the mug of now-tepid coffee nestled on the ground near their black poodle, eyed a thick slice of late summer peach and exclaimed, “Michael! If there isn’t a market here for the jewelry we made in Chicago and Glencoe, we have to adjust.”

She inhaled the fragrance of the ripe, yellow peach before taking a bite. “What if we changed our jewelry from gold and gems to plain bronze or silver?”

New oil filter in hand, Michael mumbled from under the car, “Ok, no gems, no custom work.”

“Yes!” Mo replied, her voice rising with excitement. “And we limit the variety of what we make, and....”



Wiping the remaining oil drips with an old shirt, Michael concluded, “Make it affordable, make it well, sell more work for less money.”

This was not the formula that had guided the rapid growth of their bespoke jewelry enterprise on Chicago’s North Shore, but they were desperate. Three years exhibiting at the American Craft Council (ACC) show in Rhinebeck, NY had passed, with too few sales to reward their hard work and dwindling resources. They made the decision to totally redesign their entire body of

work and create a new presentation.

Michael and Maureen retooled, learned new techniques and employed new materials. Working constantly, heating with wood that they cut and split by hand, growing a lot of their own food, spending and wasting nothing and reusing everything, they joyfully persevered.

Months flew by and soon the time had come to pack the car and drive the two hours from their home in the Berkshires to the Dutchess Country Fairgrounds in Rhinebeck, NY.

To conserve badly-needed funds, Mike and Mo spent the week of the show in a tent at a nearby campground. It was filled with other craftspeople who had made the same decision. Preparing their own food each day, they shared the communal bathhouse with other craftspeople, while fending off what seemed like thousands of ticks. They were happy to be back at the ACC Rhinebeck show, hoping they would not have to become Postal Service employees.

The new work was an immediate, resounding success. Galleries loved it. Retail customers bought it. Michael and Maureen took sufficient orders to keep busy for the rest of the year. One year later, the silver earrings sold so well they hired an employee, and then two part-time employees.

Eventually they sold 7,000 pairs of affordable silver earrings in one year!

The success allowed Michael to return to making sterling silver hollowware, principally coffee and tea services. Maureen explored enameling and sculpture.

Twenty years later, the carefully designed and priced silver earrings continued to provide the bread and butter, allowing “Michael and Maureen Banner-Silversmiths,” to invest in more and larger sterling silver sheet, while freeing Mo to create time-consuming and detailed enamels. These works she incorporated into her own elaborate neckpieces and pins, as well as Michael’s increasingly sculptural hollowware vessels.



A thousand craft shows later, they had adopted, and were in turn adopted by, a large, extended family of fellow craft show exhibitors and customers. They loved working and guided their lives by their own North Star.

Thirty-nine years after setting out from Chicago's North Shore, and 38 years after nearly chucking it all for positions as Post Office employees, Maureen and Michael became the first husband-and-wife team to be honored by the James Renwick Alliance, as Masters of their Medium-Metal.

It had been a wonderfully exhilarating ride and it's not over yet.

Postscript: Having been professionally involved in the craft business since 1959

(since 1968 with Maureen), Michael felt it was time to get on with many of the other ideas he had had for the past several years. So he and Maureen retired from doing shows. While they will never stop being creative in everything they do, Michael wanted a break from working in metals. Maureen is still doing a bit in the studio along with gardening and painting. Michael is involved in volunteer work for the village of Monterey, MA where they have lived for the past 40 years. Michael will spend winters in his wood shop, building some furniture — something he knows almost nothing about, which is exciting.