

NETWORKING

Connect with industry leaders

by Mimi Shimp



The Electric Quilt Company

The unique story of the past, present and future

I love the stories behind the companies in this great industry of ours, and in this issue I bring you the story of The Electric Quilt Company. Most of you probably know Penny McMorris, the “original” face of The Electric Quilt Company. But do you know Dean, the math professor turned computer programmer, or Andrea Bishop, who has become the “new” face of The Electric Quilt Company, or Ann Rutter, who was the first employee and still works there today? Let me introduce you to this great company and dynamic people who run it.

Penny told me that her husband, Dean Neumann (the math professor), fell in love with quilts — and Penny — at about the same time. He tagged along with her to quilt shows and to the homes of quilt friends. He started to think that if quilters could actually display the designs they had in their head, then seeing them on the computer screen would naturally enhance their creativity. And besides, he wanted to work on a project with Penny! Little did he know his involvement with quilting would not involve her help at all. People often think Penny was right there beside Dean explaining, “what quilters really wanted.” After teaching himself to program, he wrote the first version of Electric Quilt, which debuted at Spring Market in 1991. The first EQ was completely Dean’s own creation. He has used his own ideas, plus user-requested features, for each subsequent version.

Penny says that the company really got started when she showed the half-finished software on an episode of her TV show, “Great American Quilt,” in 1991. Though she appeared to be using the program on camera, she actually had no idea how to use it! Dean knelt beside her, off camera, and worked the keyboard! (The first EQ didn’t even use a mouse!) When that program segment aired, quilters from across the country tracked them down, and were very eager to get their hands on the software. After collecting the names and addresses from each caller and keeping the index cards alphabetized in a shoe box, they finally sent a mailer to announce the that EQ1 was ready to ship. Penny’s daughter, Erin, a recent college grad was living at home for the summer and jokingly said she would move out when they had 100 names in the shoebox. She moved out at the

end of the summer! (Erin is now a fabric designer and will debut a line called “Urban Garden,” for FreeSpirit this spring.) Many of the original users are still designing with EQ and Penny says they are the reason The Electric Quilt Company is still in business.

The success of Electric Quilt has not been without the usual stumbling blocks of all new businesses. Penny says, “Neither Dean nor I had a business background. We were totally clueless about how much work starting and running a business would be. We now know. We have great sympathy

for quilt store owners who not only work all day, but also teach classes at night. Both of us had day jobs. Dean was still teaching; I was the corporate Art Curator for Owens-Corning Corporation three days a week. We spent nights and weekends planning the business, then finally hired a couple of employees (still with us today). Since the company was in the basement of our home, the phone would ring at all hours, and I would always answer it, and that included Saturday and Sunday. I still remember the first three things I learned as we built our business. Once you have a good

product you must work twice as hard making sure people know about it. People really value their money, and it’s hard to get them to spend it on your product. And, everyone is different. Each person learns differently, and has a different reason for using your product.”

Penny has noticed over the years that the users are getting much more computer savvy and serious about becoming professional designers; they increasingly want to design for magazines and books, sell their quilts, and receive commissions; and they are more prepared than ever to do this. She believes that quilt designers will increasingly want to create virtual quilts for Web site patterns, books and magazines without actually needing to sew the quilt. And the new EQ6 is there to help them every step of the way.

Attracting the younger seamstress and quilter is a goal of many companies in the industry, and The Electric Quilt Company has this age group in mind as well. The staff thinks many seamstresses in their 20s and 30s want to design on their own and don’t want to be told what their

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designs should look like. The standard “do and don’t” rules aren’t running through their heads. They approach quilt design quite freshly. They care more about improvisation than technique. “Good for them,” Penny said. “That same spirit attracted many of us to quilting in the late 1960’s — the pure love of combining fabric prints. My first patchwork was a tablecloth sewn from crudely cut patches.”

The Electric Quilt Company introduced beginner-level software called Quilt Design Wizard when they noticed a new type of user. This user had no real knowledge of quilting, yet wanted to play with blocks and fabrics. Interestingly, this software is also perfect for older users who feel a bit computer-intimidated. Quilt Design Wizard was designed to be the first step for that new quilter or computer novice. And to keep their interest there are free downloadable projects with new blocks and fabrics each month at www.quilt设计wizard.com.

From humble beginnings with EQ1, Electric Quilt has gone on to become the premier design software for the consumer market. In addition to the new EQ6, the company now carries printable fabric sheets; lines of fabric on CD so the consumer can design with real-time fabrics; pieced, applique and foundation-block software; specialty books, and many other items related to computers and quilting.

Andrea Bishop has become the “new” face of The Electric Quilt Company because she does TV appearances and demonstrates EQ at shows. She’s also the EQ Web master and wrote the EQ6 user manual. Penny met Andrea when Andrea worked at the local video rental store. Dean and Penny rent lots of movies, and so they gradually got to know Andrea because she was so outgoing and friendly. Andrea was a math/computer science major, and one day she mentioned looking for another job, so Penny hired her on the spot. Penny says, “This always reminds me of the ‘Lana Turner being discovered working at a soda fountain’ story, but with a modern twist! (And Andrea still tells her about good movies.)

What does the future hold for The Electric Quilt Company? They are working with Brenda Groelz at *Quiltmaker* magazine on a series of quilting design CDs from the magazine. They are working on a book called *Blending Photos with Fabrics II*, with Mary Ellen Kranz. They plan to work more with designer Karen Stone, and would like to work with Jan Magee at *Quilter’s Newsletter* magazine. And, they’ll soon have a whole series of EQ6 accessory books by the “usual suspects” who’ve written their previous EQ books. No moss grows under their feet, or should we say no dust collects on their keyboard!

Mimi Shimp is the owner of Quilttime. She lives in Las Vegas, Nev. and has been in the quilting industry for 19 years.
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