

Delores Johnson

Where: At her home in Huntington, WV

Date: November 8, 2017

Location: Huntington, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 34:30

Delores Johnson is an African American quilter and retired Marshall University linguistics professor. She was born in Athens, Georgia, but was raised and has lived in West Virginia for over the past 60 years. She is one of the founders of the Saint Peter Claver Piecemakers quilting group in Huntington, WV.

EH: Emily Hilliard

DJ: Delores Johnson

00:00

EH: So could you introduce yourself and tell me who you are and where you from?

DJ: I'm Delores Johnson. I am originally from Athens, Georgia and but I've been raised and lived here in West Virginia for the last 60-some years.

EH: So you moved here when you were pretty young?

DJ: Quite young, yes.

EH: Tell me a little about your family and parents.

DJ: Um, well my mother was a seamstress, my father worked with... well his last job was with the airport up here in Huntington, Tri-State airport. They were hardworking people, they moved here from Georgia. Daddy worked at that time, this was back in the 40s, before he went to service, really, he served in WWII. But he was working for 7-UP Bottling Co. and they transferred him to Cincinnati and we lived there for a couple years or so and then they transferred him here because there was a bottling company over here in Ohio, somewhere. Pop. We called it pop. Soda pop. (laughs)

EH: Oh yeah, that's what I called it.

DJ: Yeah.

EH: And your mother—what kind of seamstress work did she do?

DJ: She just did, she sewed for us and sewed for people in the neighborhood and community. She was just a wonderful... she taught herself to sew and became quite, quite good at it. She loved it.

EH: I'm jealous. I need to work on my sewing skills.

DJ: (laughs)

EH: Um, so why don't you tell me a little bit about your career path and how you got into quilting and that community.

DJ: Well, my professional career path was as a teacher, and I started out—I had a degree, my undergraduate degree was in French and Spanish. I was going to go to the UN and be an interpreter. But then I fell in love! (laughs) And got married, and ended up staying here, but um, but I studied languages and I did my master's degree in English and taught that for something like 20 years over at Mar—I mean at Huntington High School here. Taught at __ Junior High School for a year, then went to Huntington High School. Um, and then once I went to Marshall, I decided to go on and get my PhD because they wanted everybody who was teaching there to have that, so I started that program and went into languages and studied sociolinguistics and linguistics and you know, those things. And loved it. I was at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, that's where I got my degree. And when it, when um, gosh I don't know.

When the closer I got to retirement, the more I started thinking about, well, what are you gonna do, what do you wanna do with your time then and I had no idea, but I had gone to a quilt show and I saw some quilts that were being done today that were just marvelous. And I had a friend that I grew up with who was out in California, who was a quilter. And she was here and her cousin, both of them were here, and they had a show out at the museum—both of them were quilters. And it was just really interesting stuff, so I thought, “Gee I’d like to learn how to quilt!” And my girlfriend Sandra Clemmons said, “Me too! Why don’t we get us a group together.” And her mother said, “Aw, there’s nothing to it, you just cut up the fabric and sew it back together.” And we thought, well we can do that! So we did. We asked a few people if they were interested and ended up with 20-some people showed up and said they wanted to learn to quilt too, so that’s how we got into that.

And it becomes obsessive. You know you start something and you become obsessed with it. And that’s about what happened to us.

EH: So who was teaching you how to?

DJ: At first we didn’t have a teacher, I think we had started for about a year or two and then we decided we needed a teacher, you know, because there was a lot to learn, and Sandra knew this lady at Marshall, Nancy McCormick, who works with Kell Program (?) who was an excellent quilter, and she agreed to come and teach us, and so she came and she’s still with the group too. She’s been there ever since.

EH: And was there a particular style you were doing?

DJ: We started out with the traditional quilting with the blocks, and you know, building the blocks into different quilts. We thought we were so good. I think we had been quilting for about... we had learned how to do 2 or 3 blocks you know, I mean because there are millions of blocks and they have all these traditional names and all this stuff. But we had learned to do maybe 3 or 4 blocks and we decided that we’re gonna do the Underground Railroad quilt. Well, it’s a sampler and a sampler will have different blocks in it, you know. And we had, so we had to learn about, hmm 15 or 16 blocks in order to make that and it was very challenging! (laughs) But we stuck with it and the girls were all real proud of their projects and they turned out really well.

5:52

EH: And then what have you gotten into as you’ve kind of developed your skills?

DJ: Well the more I... I’m one of those people that when you get interested in anything, anything you can read about it, anybody you can learn from about it, you seek ‘em out. So I began reading a lot and subscribing to magazines and stuff and I saw more and more of the modern art quilts and fell in love with that but had no idea how to tackle an art quilt! And didn’t think I had any artistic ability. But there were things I wanted to say with my quilting that I couldn’t say with the traditional quilting. So I took a class online with Mary, Marilyn... can’t think of her last name. Marilyn Bel, Bel, Belcher, something like that. And she had a class on doing portraits. And so I took that class—I was really pleased with how it turned out. So then I started taking other classes. I took a class online, I went to Paducah and took some classes, I was in Ohio taking classes ‘cause they had a big quilt show there every year and they would have workshops all during that. So I learned to do lots of new techniques and things through the classes and study like that. And the reading from the magazines and books and stuff.

EH: Nice. And what was the name of that group that you started?

DJ: The Piecemakers. Saint Peter Claver Piecemakers, yeah.

EH: And where do you all meet?

DJ: We meet once a week at St. Peter Claver church in their parish hall. They have a huge hall in the back there and they have those wonderful tables that don't scratch or mar, which makes it really nice. And there are 18 in our group now.

EH: So you all bring your projects?

DJ: We bring our projects, we work on them, and we do a lot of donation. We give—we make pillowcases for the children at the hospital, we give to Hospice, we make quilts for Hospice, we have for Ronald McDonald, different organizations. We try to do three or 4 charity quilts each year and then they're given to a group and they use it for a fundraiser. They have an auction and all that. So we do a lot of that and then we go with our own little projects and do things and we have—once a year we have a show. We have an exhibit (laughs) and invite the whole community and that's turned out to be really a popular thing and fun for us to do.

EH: And when is that?

DJ: It's usually in May. May or June.

EH: And it's at the parish?

DJ: Yeah, it's in the parish hall. We thought about moving it because we need a larger venue but it's so hard to get everything you need there. Where everything we need now is in the parish hall, and they store it for us. They store the big frames for us to hang them and all that stuff. Yeah.

EH: And so the charity quilts are collaborative?

DJ: Yeah, they're pretty collaborative. Each one of the people in the group makes a giveaway quilt for whatever major charity, for example, this year we're doing Hospice. So each one of us will make a lap quilt for a hospice patient. Then we make the group quilts. We have—everyone makes a block for a particular group quilt that we're going to give away that'll be used for, that will be given to them for a fundraiser.

EH: I think that was something I saw—your quilt for some kind of organization.

DJ: Yeah.

EH: For a fundraiser.

DJ: Right, right. Yeah, we usually do that. We do that every year. And there are—we divide ourselves up into 4 groups and each group makes a quilt that will be donated. And that's the collaborative work on a quilt.

10:26

And those are, those are pretty much traditional quilts, although sometimes we branch out and do something a little different (laughs).

EH: So do you want to talk about some of the quilts that you've made that you're proud of?

DJ: Mm... well the first quilt I made was the portrait of my son, and I'll show that one too you. And that was in 2009, that was when I took the class from, gosh I can't think of her name, but that was the class online. It was the first time I'd ever taken a class online, although I taught classes online (laughs) but not, you know, they were not skill classes, you know, hands on making stuff. And so I wondered how that would work—it worked beautifully. She had been doing this for a while and it was a wonderful experience because she gave you lots of feedback back and forth all the time and she had a system where you posted your work up there and she could critique it, other people in the class could see it and talk about, you know, give you feedback on it, so it was really good. Another—I've always admired the work of Katie... Katie Pasquini Masopust? She has these huge quilts and...she's an artist. And she is able to include lots of transparency in her pieces and um, her colors and all that are just great. And she had a workshop at Paducah and it was a week-long workshop and I went there and worked with her for that week—it was a great experience. And what else? I don't know.

This is my quilt this year that I did (points to quilt above mantle). It was a little—my protest quilt (laughs)

EH: Nice.

DJ: A lot of people—I posted it online with a group called “Just Us Quilters” and they put it up for one day and took it down! (laughs) So I don't think it was... But I called it... “Upon listening to Jimi Hendrix play the Star Spangled Banner.” And so... yeah.

EH: So why—I mean it's not overtly political, necessarily.

DJ: Not necessarily, except it's sort of a then and now? (laughs)

EH: Yeah.

DJ: The way it was, the way it is. Yeah.

EH: That's interesting.

DJ: I think that's probably... quilters don't like political stuff. But that's—and that's not true though, because I mean I went to a show in Columbus that they were doing on feminism, and it was spectacular!

EH: So it was about feminism in quilting?

DJ: It was all about feminism... no, not about feminism in quilting, about feminism period. About being a woman in this society. A lot of it was protest stuff, you know. And so it was wonderful. (laughs) So I've seen some different things.

EH: Yeah there was one we talked about in a class I think it's “Death to Sunbonnet Sue”?

DJ: Ah.

EH: So it was this quilting group and they were getting so tired of the Sunbonnet Sue symbol, so then they decided, oh we're gonna do these panels that—it's like these different ways of Sunbonnet Sue like, dying? (laughs) So it was pretty subversive. And I think there's a little feminist message in it too, so...

and then there was another one where Sunbonnet Sue was kind of liberated, and she was like sunbathing at the pool or whatever.

DJ: (laughs) Oh wow.

EH: Yeah, so.

DJ: Well that's what I mean. They've had shows like that... they have those speak out on different issues that are contemporary issues now. I went to the what, National African American Quilt Conference, it was the first one ever this past summer and it was out in Lawrence, Kansas. And they did a whole display of historical quilts and a lot of them were protest quilts, and they were—I mean there were some gorgeous pieces of work there. And there was one woman who had made like capes but she had mounted them on the wall, and each one was in recognition of a Female Freedom Fighter.

EH: Wow.

DJ: And beautiful work. Just beautiful work.

EH: I think... I was in DC for the first Obama inauguration and I went to—I guess it was all these quilters making Obama quilts.

DJ: Mmhm.

EH: It was so—there were some from Ghana. It was really, really cool. I wonder—maybe they're back with their original owners—I'm not sure if that was an exhibit that's...

DJ: They traveled and there was a book published. Carolyn Mazloomi, who is a very noted African American quilter—she has published several books and she did a book on the Obama quilts.

EH: Okay.

DJ: I think there's one recently on Trayvon Martin...

EH: Oh, wow.

DJ: Yeah, but she's done some other books too. She's done Sacred Symbols and you know, things like that. So... Yeah, I have a couple of her books there.

EH: Yeah, so you said that there are things that you want to say in quilts that you didn't... felt like you couldn't say with the traditional—so what are some of those?

DJ: Well like this! (laughs and points at Jimi Hendrix Star Spangled Banner Quilt above mantle). Like the flag quilt. Um, I don't know. I wanted to... I love doing the portraits because I think in doing the portraits you're able to capture a certain quality of a person that you wouldn't capture just in normal, maybe painters do it or other people in arts, but it's really a good feeling, or you know, it's like an epiphany when you're doing a portrait of a person with a quilt. And I love landscapes—gorgeous trees and stuff and the way that land looks now—this right now. (laughs) it is so pretty out there that I would love to just jump in there and do 10 quilts on that.

17:41

EH: Yeah, right.

DJ: Yeah. The tree quilt—I'll show you that one. "I Love a Tree" is... I was in South Carolina and we saw this tree called the angel tree and it's—a live oak but the limbs go down and come back up off the ground like that. They just—it's a huge, huge tree, and I found out... It looks like angel wings, you know? I thought, oh wow—that's why they... but no it was on this land that belonged to this guy and his name was John Angel so it was a tree- it was like, his tree. But live oaks have that quality sometimes, that grow so old. This was an old, old tree. Yeah. So I love doing that, and I did that challenge—we had a challenge this last year. And that's a thing quilters often do—they'll challenge each other to do certain things and we had to choose a holiday that was not a common holiday and then make a quilt to represent it. And it was so funny because I got "I love a tree" and I love trees! (laughs) it was a no-brainer for me! So this year we were gonna do it again, and this girl said, "Well I don't think that you oughta do a tree." And I said I wouldn't, I'll chose something else. And so I forget now what I got. But anyway, she said, I'll trade with you. She had National Popcorn Day and I thought, popcorn, what am I gonna do with popcorn?! (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

DJ: I'm not real interested in doing a popcorn quilt! But I traded with her because it was fun.

EH: So are you gonna do popcorn?

DJ: I guess! I don't know.

EH: (laughs)

DJ: if I decided to take up the challenge! (laughs) Yes.

EH: What do you do when you're making quilts? Do you listen to music, do you listen to books on tape?

DJ: I listen to books on tape. And what I have found is that if I'm listening to the book on tape, I move along faster because I'm not focused on what I'm doing and trying to be a perfectionist and get everything just right and get the points perfect and all that stuff. And I get caught up in the story. So I found that's really helpful. Or I'll listen to music, but I'll listen to music that I don't usually listen to. I might listen to easy listening or you know, soft classical music or something like that. Something that just kinda takes your mind away from what you're specifically doing—I find that's very helpful.

And books on tape have been wonderful because I belong to two book groups, and so reading I can get the books and listen to them while I'm sewing—I can still sew.

EH: Yeah, do you find that any of that inspires your quilt-making—what you're listening to?

DJ: Jimi Hendrix! (laughs)

EH: yeah, right!

DJ: Listening to Jimi Hendrix inspired that quilt. I'm trying to think, is there another quilt that I can really literally say was inspired by... no, not normally. (laughs)

EH: And when you're meeting with your group, are you talking about quilt-making techniques, are you just talking about your lives, what goes on there?

DJ: Um, both, both. I mean I think, like you say, it's an art where you incorporate yourself into what you're doing all the time and whatever's happening in your life is influencing what you're doing a lot too. Yeah, we talk about techniques. I've taught different techniques myself. I've taught paper piecing, I've taught how to do the portraits, um, you know, things like that. And we've had different people come in that teach things.

EH: Nice.

DJ: We're always, we're always busy. Yeah. (laughs)

EH: Aside from the quilters that you've mentioned, are there any other quilters or artists that you admire or look to for inspiration?

DJ: Oooh, loads and loads of quilters! I mentioned 2 or 3 but oh gosh, there are so many really wonderful artists out there in the quilting field. I belong to a group called SAQA which is Studio Art Quilt Associates and they have a conference every other year and some of the top names in quilting belong to that group and they—it's amazing to go to one of their conf—well, it's not really a conference, well yeah, to go to their conferences because their conferences are not like going to Paducah to the annual quilt shows there, where they have shows, they have vendors, they have some classes. The SAQA group is much more professional—they're professional artists, they're studio artists working with this. One person I really like that belongs to that group is Leni Wiener? Leni Wiener, W-I-E-N-E-R. She does portraits and she does a lot of other things—scenes, you know with people, hers usually have people in them, so I like her work. Um, she spoke at the last SAQA conference I attended. I didn't attend this year, I attended year before last in Philadelphia, and it was fabulous. Yep. Yep. And I belong to the West Virginia Quilters and they have an annual exhibit every year in June and they have a jury, an artist come in to jury the work, and so they are selective. And that's with the West Virginia Cultural Center too, they jury your work into that. I mean Jesus, there are 2 or 300 people who submit work. So when I was first selected to put a piece in that I was so happy I could dance! (laughs) I was beside myself! (laughs) and nobody went up there to see it. I mean, well that's not true, cause I kept saying, "You gotta go up there and see it, it's hanging up there, it's hanging up there!" Yeah.

EH: And that was at the Culture Center?

DJ: That was at the Cultural Center, yeah.

EH: Where does the guild have their annual?

DJ: They have theirs in Summersville at the Summersville Community Center, not Community Center, it's like the fieldhouse—not the fieldhouse, called the... what is it, the center downtown. I can't think of it. Big Sandy—Big Sandy something.

EH: Oh, the arena.

DJ: Yeah, it's like a big arena like that.

EH: OK

25:08

DJ: They have it there every year—it's really nice. And they do classes. They have noted quilters come in and the quilt guild I belong to, where I got interested in the West Virginia quilters, is Creative Quilters,

which meets once a month here. And they have about, well I think they told me they had about 100 members, and they meet about once a month and they do the same thing—they bring in quilters sometimes who do trunk shows and you know, share their work and show their work and talk to you about it. And um, they have challenges, you know, things like that too. And everybody—what I love about theirs is they do show and tell every month and so people who've done work that month and have things to show, they'll get up there and they do some beautiful work, but it's mostly traditional, it's mostly traditional too.

EH: Yeah. Do you have quilts that you want to make that are on your list?

DJ: Ohhhh yeah.

EH: Lots of them? (laughs)

DJ: Lots. Yes. Yes. I started a quilt a few years ago and I—I went to Africa, I've been to Africa twice. And when I was there I bought lots of fabric, and I have all this gorgeous African fabric, and I was... I did make a bunch of purses with some of it, but I still have lots of it and I want to make... I started a quilt called African Memories using the fabric, and it is sitting there (laughs) waiting to be finished, so I'd like to get back to that and finish it. Um... I don't know, I want to do... I've done a portrait of my youngest son, and I have an older son and a daughter, and they wanna know, when are you gonna do one for us? So I'd like to get those done, um... I don't know, there are just a lot of... Lots and lots of things.

EH: yeah.

DJ: Yeah.

EH: Where do you work at home? Do you have a quilt room?

DJ: Yes. But you can't see that! (laughs) It's a mess!

EH: That's fine. That's totally fine. I wouldn't expect it any other way.

DJ: (laughs) Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I have a basement—I moved, when I first started I started upstairs in the front bedroom and—but there's no room up there. I mean it was immediate that I realized this is never gonna work! Number one you gotta crawl around on the floor and I couldn't—it was hard. Yeah.

27:59

EH: Well is there anything you would like to add about your work?

DJ: Mmmm I think I've said everything! What else can I tell you? I think I've said it all.

EH: We can look at some quilts.

DJ: Okay, I've got some—I'll pull some up. They're in the other room.

EH: Okay, should I follow you or stay here?

DJ: Yeah, sure. Yeah, cause I'll lay them out here. Some of the ones we talked about.

EH: Oh, and I should well, I'll have the recorder on first and then I'll take some photos if that's alright.

DJ: Okay. This is my son. That's the one I did. That was the online course.

EH: Oh, cool!

DJ: And that is my nephew and he is a dancer on a ship? And they do all those things, and he had this picture and I fell in love with it. There's a, sort of a clown or something.

EH: I like the green.

DJ: And there's one of my landscapes—that's Ritter Park.

EH: Oh wow. That's gorgeous.

DJ: It's a place right out there—it's beautiful, it's one of the most beautiful spots. Here's my tree. That's the live oak.

EH: So nice.

DJ: And this one, I entered a show in Maryland, Virginia—Virginia, it's called Sacred Threads? And I entered that and that was chosen as one of the quilts to travel and it traveled all the way out west and back! (laughs) And they showed it—I mean I got a letter from a woman in Seattle about it and I can't remember, some other places. Oh, Denver—it was in Denver. I think that's where it was—there for a while.

EH: Very cool.

DJ: And then this one—my daughter's an artist—she draws. And she had drawn this and I said, oh let me have that, let me take that, I'd like to try that, and so I did.

EH: That's amazing. Was it a silhouette?

DJ: The drawing was a silhouette. Yeah, it was a silhouette drawing. I'm gonna try and see if I can't do that. So this summer when I went to Kansas I took a little workshop there with Lola Jenkins who's a wonderful quilter, and she does a kind of silhouette work and we did one of Mandela, and then when we first started—I'll show you one other quilt...

EH: Oh, the leaves...

DJ: yeah, that was one. Now this was experimental—I experiment a lot and I was trying to learn how to do collage or something and she said, you get 15 fabrics and you—all that stuff, you know. But then I had... let's see. That's my bargello. We did that one year as our group.

EH: Oh cool.

DJ: We did that and everybody, everybody made a bargello. (laughs)

EH: And what is a bargello?

DJ: Bargello is a kind of gosh, I don't know how to explain it—kind of crazy we—you know it's kind of, it's a certain technique used to get the shading of the colors and stuff like that. And the way you do it—

the sizes of the pieces and the colors all go together to form abstract kinds of images. I know there's another definition of bargello but I have no idea what it is, what the real idea is.

EH: I like the bright colors.

DJ: So those are some. And I do stuff like this for craft shows and stuff where you make like little table... stuff like that. That's the crafty part of it. Oh! And Christmas cards! You have to see my Christmas cards—let me go get one.

EH: Okay.

DJ: Yeah, I make Christmas cards every year because our church has a huge Christmas bazaar so...

EH: Okay.

32:37

DJ: Here are my Christmas cards. These are all fabric cards.

EH: Cool.

DJ: Santa! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) those are great.

DJ: You know they don't hardly make angel fabric anymore.

EH: Really?

DJ: I saw these gorgeous angels a few years ago, and now I can't find any fabric with pretty angels, I mean I've seen some little ones, and these were... but anyway.

EH: Nice.

DJ: And I do altar cloths for church.

EH: Okay.

DJ: I've done 4-5 altar cloths for our church. So that's it!

EH: That's it. Well, why don't I take some pictures.

DJ: Oh, you can.

EH: I'll turn this off. Can I keep this?

DJ: Sure. How can I do this—where's the...

34:30

END OF TAPE

