

# The Misti Way

*by Peggy Blessing*

I was talking with a friend the other day about how certain decisions you made, people you met, or circumstances you faced took your life in a different direction than it might otherwise have gone. All of us have stories like these. But I want to share a special story about Misti Washington, a woman whose circumstances caused a chain reaction, weaving a common thread between 1000's of people.

It began in 1937 when Misti was faced with a terrible situation at the age of 12. She was stricken with polio, and spent many lonely hours and days lying immobile on her back in a hospital without much incentive to get better. Some kind and concerned interns decided they would teach her a craft to help give her the desire to recover. They strapped knitting needles to her hands and showed her how to knit. Misti persevered and, through her slow painstaking efforts, she gained the use of her fingers. Her new interest in fibers stimulated a recovery, and she began to weave on a small loom lying on her stomach and leaning on her elbows.

After two years in the hospital, she returned home and was able to walk at a snail's pace with crutches and braces on her arms, legs and back. She felt that crafts were largely responsible for her recovery. She went on to finish high school with honors, attended college, got a job at Johns Hopkins University and married. There were many challenges throughout all these stages of her life, but she managed to not be defeated.

She joined a weaving guild in New York, and was disappointed to learn that she would not be able to pursue basketry because the physical requirements of preparing materials like ash bark were beyond her physical capabilities. She began to focus on collecting baskets and devoured books on the techniques and history of basketmaking. After moving to San Diego, she happened to read about a basketry course being offered at the Museum of Man. This series of classes

was designed to revive interest in the techniques of local Indians who used soft fibers such as leaves, grasses and stems. This triggered Misti's new life in the world of basketry. She spent hours teaching herself how to identify different forms of vegetation, and many of those hours took place at Quail Botanical Gardens.

As more and more people saw her work, she was asked to teach. She began doing this at home, then traveled to other cities and eventually taught at the Museum of Man where it all began. Misti was proud of those students who went on to become teachers and sell their work. Her inspiration for teaching was watching people learn and develop their own styles. She said, "A most exciting thing is that people come, then leave as different persons - taking the fundamentals and doing their own growing." She was adored by many who sought her instruction. One student was quoted as saying, "She is extremely supportive, she is never bullying, trying to impose her ideas or ways of working on you. Rather, she has a true gift of allowing and encouraging you to express yourself and your artistic endeavors. She has extreme credibility. She is a wealth of knowledge. More than anything Misti has a very endearing quality about her. She is communicative and can draw you in."

"She puts everyone at ease immediately. She's quick to laugh and always available to her students. People seem to blossom in her class, as individuals as well as weavers. It's a joy to be one of her students."

Misti once said, "The most important thing that has become apparent to me lately is how many wonderful people there are involved in basketry, teaching basketry and writing basketry. Every time I get a chance to go to a conference or a talk, or read a book about basketry, I am transported deeper into the desire to spread the word further."

I got into a conversation with artist Sherry Harris at the 2006 Welburn Festival, because I

felt a connection to her work. I was surprised to discover that Misti was her teacher when she lived in Fallbrook some time ago. She said she tells all her students Misti's story, and the following is a quote from Sherry's website, "By the time I met her, Misti Washington already had a reputation for making beautiful baskets and gourd art with these natural materials. My life was changed after this experience learning from Misti. I felt that I had found my lifelong media. I had fallen in love with using materials from nature. This worked very well with my love to garden. I ended up experimenting with making baskets, gourd art and woven sculpture." I have since met others who were fortunate to have had Misti as their teacher. Although I envy these people, I have no doubt that her spirit is with me each time I share some time with my basket and gourd friends.

About four months before Misti died in her sleep on February 24, 1997, she was the guest of honor at an event at Quail Botanical Gardens at which the founding of the Misti Washington Gourd and Basket Guild was announced. This event was a part of a weekend of basketry classes. As many of you know, one of the main activities the Guild performs is the now biennial Weekend in the Garden (the next one is May 5 and 6, 2007). Over the last 10 years, this has grown to be a very successful event for the Gardens and the Guild, now averaging 35 classes with 250 students. It has brought students and teachers from across the nation together in the spirit of Misti - sharing, caring and pure enjoyment of learning both the fundamental and the innovative possibilities of basketry, gourd crafting, and weaving. Check out the MWGBG website, [www.baskets-gourds.com](http://www.baskets-gourds.com) for the 2007 class catalog and registration form.

Belonging to a group like the MWGBG can be richly rewarding, giving us all the opportunity to influence others on many levels in a positive way. Because the Guild

was founded in Misti's honor, it took on the characteristics of her way of thinking and her way of teaching others. I think she would be very proud to know the seeds she planted have blossomed and grown beyond the walls of the Garden, far out into the world.

*Basketmaker*, April 1988, "A Visit with Misti Washington," by Jim Bennett was used as resource.

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*One of Misti Washington's famous Grandmother Baskets  
-- Photo by Carol Lang*