

Why Get Certified?

by Gail Sirna

Recently there has been a rather lengthy, and sometimes heated discussion on the ANG chat list regarding teachers' certification. Interestingly, many opinions were submitted, with scarcely any of them from certified teachers. Many people suggested that they didn't care whether a teacher was certified or not; they chose a class for seminar based on whether or not they liked the piece. And that is as it should be.

But some people were openly hostile to certification, and even to the certified teachers. Some claimed it was not a worthwhile endeavor. Some actually suggested it stifled one's creativity. Some claimed it was a waste of money and time--that it produced no benefits. Some claimed the certified teachers felt themselves superior. Well, I am here to refute that, at the risk of preaching to the choir, for of course, the readers of this article are all members of NAN, an organization that certifies embroidery teachers.

It was twenty five years ago that I completed Teachers' Certification, Level II at NAN, which was then called Valentine. Before I even started certification I was already teaching locally, and even occasionally elsewhere in my region. I designed pieces, wrote directions, and was going along okay. So what did I get out of two years of such demanding work?

In a word: **NETWORKING!** When one signs up for any of the embroidery certifications one acquires a circle of mentors and fellow students -- who live all over the country -- and these people become your support group, and your champions. The counselors and directors in these programs are vested in you and your progress; they are committed to your success. They become your best promoters. You also develop a relationship with your fellow candidates, helping one another with presentations, finding suppliers, and just in general, the sharing of ideas and knowledge. Even alumni of the program have a certain interest in who is coming along behind them, and will try to get to know the new graduates. The support staff at any of the cert programs becomes a sounding board, a source of information, and committed mentors.

So many of the people one encounters along the certification path, at sometime in their lives, chair a seminar, or serve on a faculty selection committee. They are often program or workshop chairman in their home chapters. These people are familiar with the new candidates and graduates, and are probably acquainted with their work. So right there a certification graduate has a leg up; her name is familiar to a lot of influential people.

And when you are selected to teach at your very first national seminar, when you walk into the faculty reception all by yourself most likely you will know someone. And they will know you. It's a comfortable feeling.

But there are more benefits to certification than just that very social one. Certification requires you to become organized; it requires you to meet deadlines. It requires you to juggle several tasks simultaneously. It asks you to produce a design on cert's schedule, not when the spirit

moves you. This reflects the life of the successful needleart teacher who may be stitching on a piece at the same time that she is writing directions for another, and packing kits for a chapter visit--and writing a proposal for a seminar two years hence. Those are a lot of plates spinning at one time, and one must be up to the task. So certification gives one a foretaste of that hectic life.

Certification does not teach one how to stitch--there are plenty other classes of that type offered by ANG & EGA and others. What certification does do is teach the candidate to organize a needleart course so that the student progresses through the elements in an orderly fashion, with one skill building upon another, going from easy to more difficult. The candidates plan time allowances, so there is not a crunch at the end. Paper work is an important part of certification, for it is the one thing the student takes home with her from your class, so a great deal of time and effort is spent helping the candidate produce really good instruction booklets. Certification teaches one how to write the instruction booklets in a coherent and complete fashion. The candidate is assisted with stitch diagrams, if necessary, and with her explanation of techniques. She learns the things to include, things easily overlooked, such as a list of the kit contents, a road map of the piece, and a really good picture.

In certification one is offered classes in color and design, with special emphasis on teaching. Some of this instruction is on one's own, but some of it comes at certification workshop. And one is required to design 5 or 6 new pieces during the course of study, so that at graduation one will have at least the beginnings of a pretty impressive portfolio.

During the certification process the candidate is required to make 3 presentations, each one longer and more demanding, and differently focused, than the prior one, so that by the time of graduation one has stood up on her feet in front of what is perceived as a pretty demanding group of listeners, ones peers, and the certification staff. And at the end one teaches a mini class during the regular seminar, so that the candidate's teaching skills may be evaluated one more time, and help given. And then the candidate may put on her resume that she has taught at a national seminar.

Needlearts has grown immensely in the twenty-five years since I finished my Level II. Pieces are so much more sophisticated; no longer are they simplistic 9 square samplers designed to teach beginning stitches. Now the design is all important, and this has put greater demands on the teacher, whether aspiring or experienced.

Twenty five years ago instruction booklets were rudimentary, often handwritten and drawn, with just small diagrams of stitches. Now the students expect very complete instruction booklets with no ambiguities. And certainly produced on a computer.

More techniques are expected to be in each teacher's repertoire, and she is required to be well versed in a myriad of stitches, hundreds and hundreds of them. Students are knowledgeable themselves, and are always looking to learn something new.

Certification addresses all these disciplines, except perhaps the last. But even there one will grow in her stitching ability and knowledge in the three years working toward certification, because of her association with all those colleagues and mentors mentioned earlier. NAN strives to produce an organized and effective teacher who has participated in a variety of experiences all geared to making her an accomplished educator in the needlearts.