Pacific Portraits: The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University (Volume One)

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Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature [...] honey gatherers of the mind.
Friedrich Nietzsche

The “Bee Tree”, an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was “said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children.”
It’s Friday morning, and I’m sitting across from a woman wearing a singular maroon-colored scarf. Delicately coiled around her neck, it’s adorned with little black beads that look like eyes, rows of amphibian eyes peering from a dark pool. The woman I’m speaking with is Jean Flory, a housing specialist going into her tenth year at Pacific. Her Clark Hall office is tidy and compact and—dare I say it—cozy, with family photos peppering her work desk and papers stacked neatly in a bin near the door. Outside the office window, the sky is white cut with gray, the lawn slick from another bout of rainfall. Light filters through the window and alights on her hair—soft and feathered, silver, framing the contours of her face in a chin-length bob.

I’ve just entreated Mrs. Flory to tell me all about her job—no easy task—and she obliges, speaking slowly and deliberately, like she’s mustering up every detail. That level of precision is vital when you’re assigning rooms to over a thousand students, both new and returning; one error there, and some poor kid could be left homeless for a semester. Besides managing student housing arrangements and accounts, Mrs. Flory helps maintain the housing webpage and oversees room-and-board meal plans and billing. Right now, she tells me, her typical day consists of reading through scores of emails and responding to scores of student questions about housing. As the holidays approach, she must manage the application process for staying on campus over the coming break; she has to keep meticulous track of which students are leaving for the winter holidays and which are remaining at Pacific. As she runs through the logistics of her profession (enough responsibilities to make my head spin), she does not sound rushed or harried. Her speech remains slow and deliberate, her voice level in pitch. She doesn’t gesticulate wildly, either; she keeps her hands clasped on the table before her, small and white, like two doves nesting on a stoop. I find myself feeling calmer just from being in her presence.
At a lull in the conversation, I bring up the scarf that caught my eye at the very start of our meeting. She made it herself, she tells me; it took about two months to knit and do all the beadwork. There’s a spark of pride in her eyes, behind her violet-rimmed spectacles. She’s been knitting for years, I find out—not only for herself, but for her spouse, her children and grandchildren. And apparently, artistry runs in the family; her husband, Jim Flory, has taught photography at Pacific for over twenty years.

But somehow, that creative flair seems incompatible with her current work, with the minutiae of housing arrangements for a bunch of rowdy kids just leaving their teenage years. Are we worth it? “My work is out of necessity,” she tells me, with the quiet authority of an adult who’s been out of school, out in the real world for many years. “But I like my work environment to be challenging and interesting,” she adds. “And most of the time, this job, this position does that for me.”

What she finds most rewarding is “when… the housing department ha[s] done a good job of communicating with the residential students, so they can navigate… processes, like the housing lottery.” The spark of pride returns; I can see it in her eyes, behind her glasses, their clear transparent lenses. “We try to create an environment,” she emphasizes, “where students can become autonomous and figure things out on their own.” Of course, there are also students who find it hard to do things by and for themselves, their first time—a minute percentage, but not insignificant. She spends extra hours helping those undergrads, which can be a challenge.

But that doesn’t seem to faze her. There’s a satisfaction in her low, gentle voice, in her firm grip as we shake hands. The dim office light reflects off her hair, the mass of silver strands, before bouncing off the beads of her hand-knit scarf; the beads flicker and wink like myriad eyes in a dark pool, as we say goodbye for the day.

Later, Jean and I meet up to take a short drive to visit her close friend Margaret, a lover of anything Celtic, where her passion for knitting makes a second appearance. “I need handiwork and to multitask.” She knits many of her own scarves and hats, and has books on how to create different patterns and pieces of clothing. The shawl she made for Margaret was a challenge to create, but a challenge well worth it. The design is beautiful and eye-catching, and fits in seamlessly with the worldly decor in Margaret’s home. The circular design that borders the outside of the shawl, she explains, is called a Celtic knot. It is a deep grey and intricately woven—a piece of art that would take great skill and years of practice to create.

The next time we gather as a group, we ask about Jean’s family, and know immediately from her response that they are her passion, and every other passion she has—whether it be traveling, baking, or knitting—inevitably stems from the associations it has with her family. “Family is a
high priority for me,” she says. She defines herself through her family, and tells us that her role as a mother, wife, and “Nona” (the Italian word for grandmother) is the most important aspect of her life.

Every year, Jean and Jim make an effort to take a camping trip with their three children—Jeff, Elizabeth, and Bryce—and three grandchildren. During their trips, they love to hike, ride bikes, and swim in the lakes. The goal, she tells us, is to recreate the trips they took when her children were young. Jean and her family have traveled all over the country—from Alaska, Minnesota, Hawaii, Montana, and North and South Dakota. They’ve also taken international trips. When her children were young, they traveled across Europe to Holland, France, Austria, and Germany. “My kids still talk about it,” she says with a smile. She recounts memories of visiting museums and galleries across the continent fondly. She’s loved to travel since she and Jim were first married, and took long road trips together. “Road trips were always a chance to eat Cheetos and drink Coke,” she laughs, although she says now that she’s lost her taste for Cheetos. Her office is filled with pictures that Jim took while they were on their trips. One canvas, which she tells us is her favorite, displays a bright yellow vintage Chevy, a sight seen on one of their road trips through Southern Oregon. She tells us of a time the two of them took a trip to Alaska, where she lived at one point. As it was Jim’s first time visiting, they rented a car in Anchorage and bought tin foil to block out the constant light and air mattresses from K-Mart to create a makeshift RV. She recalls her favorite memory as the time that Jim saw his first moose while they were in Alaska. “He just went bonkers!”

Family, traveling, knitting—all of these passions meld together to create a special bond for Jean, not unlike the interwoven pattern of the complex shawl.