

## Center Stage

### At the Whim of the Fire

by Dominique Agnew

The wind did not stir even the tiniest leaves on the trees. The temperature climbed and climbed—it was hot, hot and dry. It was a perfect day—perfect for firing Pueblo pottery pieces.

Any students who have been lucky enough to have Nori Thorne as their art teacher in the past few years at John Poole Middle School know exactly what this is all about. They also know her to be a very enthusiastic and dynamic teacher. They may not realize that she really always wanted to be an art teacher, from the time she herself was in high school, but she took the long way home.

Unlike some military brats who don't necessarily have a place to call home, Nori was fortunate in that her father did two tours of duty in Colorado. They were four years each and encompassed her middle and high school years. Nori likes to say that "her heart belongs to the mountains." She was also fortunate to have had Mrs. Wynne as her art teacher from middle through high school. "She was a wonderful art teacher," raves Mrs. Thorne. "She did amazing things with middle schoolers. She was my inspiration."

By the time college rolled around, Nori's father retired from the military because of a heart condition and got a position as vice chancellor at the University of Pittsburgh which allowed Nori to attend tuition free. Unfortunately (life isn't always full of fortunate events), the University of Pittsburgh did not offer degrees in art education, so Nori graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Studio Arts. The next twenty years would find Nori involved in the field of graphic design. First, she worked for the Commodity Futures Trading Commission which was "really boring and not creative." Then she became the project manager for a real estate investment trust. This she really enjoyed. She was able to dip her hands into many different things and was given the opportunity to travel quite a bit, but the itch from her childhood was still there.

In the mid-1990s, the fortuitous decision was made. Nori walked into Mr. Sacco's office at the middle school and said she wanted to teach art. "He was taken aback," she laughs. "He told me to get accredited," and she

did. She completed the required coursework and became the art teacher at John Poole Middle School.

Nori's years as a manager in the "real world" have been a big help in her teaching. Her circuitous route to this position stands her in good stead, after all. Sometimes it crosses over as the time when she had an unruly class and said, "You're fired." (Thorne trumps Trump.) One of the girls in the class piped up, "I don't think you can fire us." Nori takes it all in good humor. She loves the middle school

named it *Friday Afternoon on the Banks of the JPMS Pond*. They cut out gigantic figures to stand and recline by the banks. They made up a play, and just as the middle school chorus was singing a song about wild geese, a flock of geese flew over the banks. It was such a perfect moment, "God had blessed us."

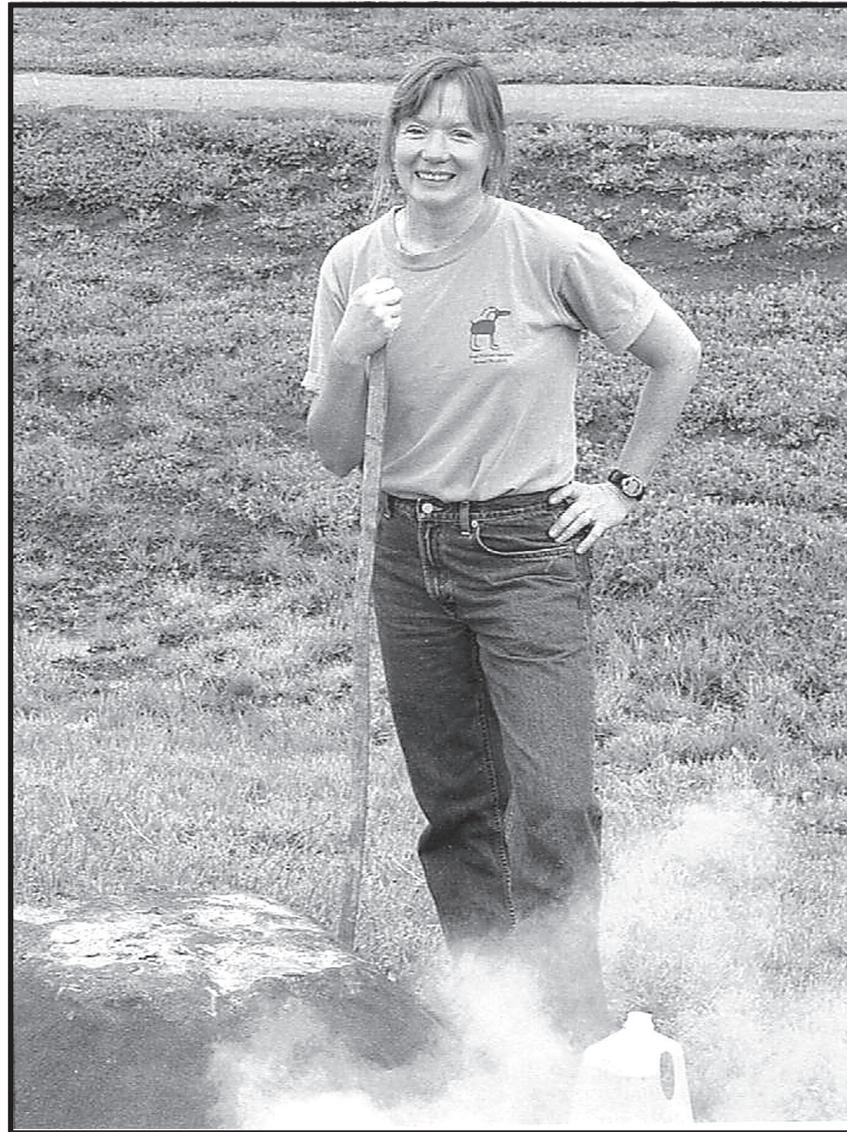
Nori can't say enough about what the students are able to achieve and accomplish. For the 2002-2003 school year, they received a grant for a Pueblo pottery project. With the full

magazine, *The Fang*, and last year was the first year they published a newspaper, *The Eyes of the Wolf* (we at the *Monocle* may have to look for other jobs soon). Both publications have already received numerous awards in various competitions, many of them first place awards. These printing projects are funded by Covanta. "Covanta is very generous to the art program. It is how we are able to buy special materials," says Thorne.

It is no surprise that Nori's own art draws heavily from the pottery of the Pueblos. "I am really inspired by Native American Southwestern pottery," relates Nori. She frequently goes camping in Chaco Canyon in New Mexico to observe and photograph the petroglyphs and pictographs. Her own backyard contains a fire pit for casting pots made from local clay. Medley Hill Makers, her studio, is where she'll create pieces on commission, but they take a very long time, and she can only work in the summer. There are not that many pieces of hers out there, especially since she typically loses thirty percent of her work to the kiln gods. All it takes is a little wind or variations in the horse manure fire to ruin a piece.

One would think that with this many ongoing projects and interests, there can't be time for anything else, but Nori is an incredible outdoorswoman as well. She has gone mountaineering and rock climbing all over the world. The highest peak she has ever reached was the 21,000-foot Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador. Of course, she has also done cave diving (who hasn't?) in Florida, and she is a "hang one" parapente pilot. She took up parapenting when she kept crashing while hang-gliding. "Parapenting is much lighter and more accessible," confides Nori. Let's not forget, there's also mountain biking and living history. "We do all the fun things," inserts her husband Tim Thorne.

All that fun aside, Nori would much prefer to talk about what "her kids" are doing. She wants to create other venues for them besides John Poole Middle to show their artwork. For the past two years, her students have swept the Montgomery County Media Festival in the graphic design category. She wants them to show on the county level, the state level, and the national level—to go as far their creativity and imagination will take them.



Nori Thorne at the fire pit.

age. "They're wild and crazy. They're funny, energetic, and they think they can do anything."

In the beginning, there was no money for the drama program, so Nori became good at writing and getting grants. The first grant she received was to reenact Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The students dressed in period costumes, many made by Nori, and recreated the scene by the pond at John Poole Middle School and

support of Principal Joe Sacco ("Mr. Sacco raises the bar"), the students dug a hole in the soccer field, put bricks all around, made a fire (they all had jugs of water from the pond just in case), added horse manure to the fire when it was just right, put a lid on it and cooked their clay pots. The pots turn black, but when wiped and rubbed, they were stunningly beautiful.

There's more. Three years ago, Mrs. Thorne began a school literary