

**Inside the Artist -  
Nina Towne  
March 2016**



**How did you begin designing with flowers? What has been your journey?**

It was really only one of those chance happenings, kismet or whatever, or circumstance. And I had no business doing it because I was a K-6 French teacher at the Waitsfield School at the time. How it came to be was Gloria Bilbrey and Paula Rembisz owned the Flower Depot but sold it to Peg O'Neill who is Zebby's (Ms. Towne's husband, Zeb) aunt when Peg moved back to VT in 2007. She knew that I was artistic and asked me to work for her. I knew nothing formally of flower design, but I've kind of done creative things my whole life. After two years it turned out to not be the right fit for Peg at that time and so she let me buy the inventory and assume the lease and I said "okay" even though it wasn't a burning passion. I opened in June of 2009. And I taught part time (3 days) and so Zebby shop-sat for me! Ha! If you could imagine! I had Gloria and Paula come in, and then I had to hire Victoria, but I was a one woman show for most of the first year. And we were gaining momentum and then Irene hit, which was a nightmare as we all know. Oh my gosh....And I walked in and I said, "Okay, this isn't so bad, okay, we had water in here...but you know me, the boot-strap gal, and yeah! We'll wash this and wash that!" I really tried to salvage what I could. So after that I didn't want to lose my momentum and I really liked what I was doing. I talked to Jeffery Larkin right away about his open space on Elm Street and he did all the repair work and I got to pick the paint and the floor and he was a great landlord and it was reasonable and the space was sweet but it small and kind of tucked away. I was there for a year and things were going really well, but I couldn't get my big cooler through the door, so I was a bit limited in that regard.

But then this space became open (80 South Main Street)! The Video King closed after 25 years and I saw the sign in the window. I figured this piece of real estate was something I couldn't even touch. Tony the Mailman, I have to give him credit, he said, "Nine, you got to give a call about that space". So I called, and Ernie Pomerleau is very generous and he got me in

here and he worked with me the first year and it was a *biiiiig* step. And the space almost doubled from what I had (on Elm Street). They were renovating the entire space because it hadn't been renovated in 25 years. So I got to pick everything. Everything in here is new! Everything! So that was really fun for my design component. I loved that! I remembered I papered up all the windows so no one could see in. And I had the big reveal on Monday, December 2, 2012. I have pictures of me pulling off the paper. So we're in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of this space, 7<sup>th</sup> year of business.



**You were teaching French for many years...what was the thing that made you flip, say yes?**

I've taught French in 4 schools: Stowe Elementary, Waterbury ELEMENTARY (not Thatcher Brook—a long time ago!), Fayston School, and Waitsfield School—27 years. I like change and I like risk. I'm not like a lot of people who are products of their routine. I embrace change and risk. I remember having a discussion with Zebby about it because owning your own business is a lot of work. And he was on board, and Peg made it very reasonable all around, because she wanted it to work for me. She was really great.

And I stayed teaching and owning my business for 5 years. And it was really hard. It was a bit of a blur. And I feel really blessed with who has worked for me and who is working for me. I'm really lucky. But it was really hard. And I decided to try a leave of absence from my teaching for a year to see if my business could support me. And then it was working, so I bit the bullet and didn't return to school.

**What was the clincher for you in that decision, not to return to school after 27 years of teaching?**

It was that creative element. I'm really really lucky because in my teaching job I had a lot of creativity, we did a lot of projects, I

had a persona (I was "Madame"). (Laughs) I didn't really have the demands that the other classroom teachers did, which meant I had a lot more freedom—which is one reason why I was attracted to the job in the first place.

I fell into French teaching too. (Laughs!) In those days, those positions barely existed, but the position wasn't a big competitive thing, it wasn't opened up and advertised because to find a K-6 elementary French teacher especially then was hard. So I got the job and worked at Stowe for 11 years, but I also worked at Waterbury Elementary part time. Then I got the job at the Waitsfield School. And these are programs I started—all of them. And then Fayston School. And then I left Fayston to open up another little store in Waitsfield called "Madame's: All Things Reconsidered." It was an eclectic mix of things. I would find these things by the side of the road and I'd fix them up, but I couldn't part with them, so it really wasn't the best business for me. (Laughs). It was a great, cute, little shop. But I was still teaching. I remember working there Friday, Saturday Sunday, and taught Monday- Thursday. I work a lot. So that was a really fun little gig.



**So you built programs for learning, developing those curriculums, seeing the raw talent of a child or the potential in a found object...?**

I've always seen possibility in things and people, even in bad circumstances; I work to see the good in it all, you know, what could be good here...?

### How do you maintain your inspiration?

There is no lack of inspiration ever. I always let my muse come, which is a weird thing to say, I know, but I've had it since I was a kid. I would say, "I have to make this book diorama—remember book dioramas? And I would open up the book until something hit me. I wait until something comes, and then I execute it. And I'm pretty fast because I see it in my mind's eye. The absolute creative license that I have to be my own boss in my own shop providing an outlet for service and for beauty that is unmatched for me. Risk and change...I say "bring it!"

### So what happens when you have a deadline? Like a wedding?

I'm a deadline worker. I'm there and I make it happen, doing it until it's done. I'm a stick-with-it-trouper-gal. And it always comes together well. Flower work is deadline work, the flowers come in, they are perishable, and I trust myself. I don't push it. I see it in my mind's eye and I just know when it's the right time to start. And I am inspired by what I see at the coolers at the wholesaler. I find what will work there so that I get the best flowers available and my flowers last a long time. I'm really good at dialing in my flowers so they are really fresh.

I talk to my clients a lot and ask a lot of questions and I also have a website guide (flower shop network) that helps my customers articulate what they are looking for, but I need a little bit of freedom so that I get them the best flowers. Of course if you want a dozen red roses I will absolutely accommodate that. I'm a people pleaser.



When you think about it, flowers are emotional, the big events, the passages of life, a bouquet to surprise someone, the doghouse bouquet, so there's a lot around it and so I put a lot into it. And there are risks in that too. It's so wonderful when my customers let me know how much my work means to them, when I really hit their mark, because I put heart into it, it's really satisfying...I love that!

### What are your personal criteria when you go about making something?

I really gravitate toward something that is interesting flower combination, with different flowers, colors and textures. It's never looks like something from the internet. I try to get different things out of the woods, or off our land, various things I find in nature. And you need to know who it's going to, who your customer is, and make sure it's not too trendy unless that's what they want—like this current trend in flower design that is asymmetrical and "out there". As much as I like that personally, it's not for everyone. One of the things I really do well is read my customers. I talk to them, I ask them questions—I LOVE that part. I love the customer who walks in and makes up a bouquet on the spot. "Let me make it now for you, it's going to be perfect!" It changes it up, and gives a shot of that risk and intuition and improvisation. It's from years of working with kids and teaching large groups of kids...its improv.



### When we talk about your relationship with risk, change, and the surrender to possibilities...You also are a jazz musician who plays the flute!

It's a union when I put it in my hand. It's a *beauuutiful* flute. Her name is Daisy. Or if she is feeling fancy, her name's Margarite (which is Daisy in French). She is a new flute and is a well-constructed, solid flute. I love her so much. When I put her in

my hands, I feel...I can't even describe...I feel her coolness on my fingers, and I know that what I'm going to create with her is going to be beautiful. Because there is one thing I've worked on and I get complimented all the time with her is: the tone, the sound. And you'll hit a clunker note, or you won't have the best solo or you'll miss a pass or riff or whatever....but the *sound* is what is so gorgeous. I can feel that sound, I become one with that sound and I *love it!* And there is a lot to learn. It's so complex.

(Laughs) I should have just stayed in the dark and noodled, and not been so aware of what are the possibilities. But if you look at the history of Jazz and playing music, you don't really need to know, you could be a virtuoso gifted player, but most people aren't, so you need to know certain pieces, you need to practice. I read and am better at improvisation, and that's really not the norm. You're really skilled at improve, playing by ear and don't read, OR you're really good at reading, you're perfect with rhythm, tempo, intonation, and articulation. But to have both is really great! It just takes a lot of work on both sides.

### How often do you play out and with whom?

I play with a jazz combo called ZJazz, which was founded by Larry Damon. (Larry and Burr Morse took me under their wing.) And that's twice a month with Jazzaoke, a program the provides a live band for open mic jazz standards. And we had my poetry gig here at the shop with the band playing behind stand up poetry. Larry likes "the jam," which puts us at the mercy of the singers and the night. Jen Dole is the MC and organizer of Jazzaoke (<http://www.wooo.tv/events>). She's amazing, I love her! But Larry compiled the group.

### What has been the biggest thing that influences your work? What made you want to pick up the flute?

I can't state a person or thing.... When I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and it was instrument night, and I told everyone that I wanted to play my Pop's trumpet. They all said, "Oh no! Your brother is going to play that. Pick another instrument." So I picked flute because all the girls played flute and I was a little kid and it was small and easy to carry and it looked pretty...I was not particularly drawn to the flute, and my brother lasted a year with the trumpet, but here I am 40+ years later, still playing the flute. So this winter, when I went home for Christmas, I got Pop's trumpet out and I got it overhauled, and I'm ready to start. So I'm going to play jazz trumpet at some point soon. I do love the flute, the *sound* of the flute. I love it in a jazz combo. It gets very lost in big band,

orchestra even, and it's always the high melody notes. I don't like that. I like the low sexy flute sounds. It's so beautiful. The voice of the flute is so diverse. It has that low and piercing high. It has a very interesting range. I like the low range. (Laughs)

**What do you do outside of the flower shop and your music?**

I do a lot of walking in the woods with Zebby and our 4 pets on our land. I do a lot of family stuff when I can. Lots of stuff with friends. I love skiing, I'm a Mad River Skier and I was a skating coach. I'm pretty athletic, but I haven't been able to do a whole lot of that lately. I don't have a lot of extra time. But I like my down time. I have a fairly simple life. I don't have TV or internet at home. I answered a call on WDEV's "Trading Post", and I went to her house and I took home 500 of Poppa Joe's VCR's collection (RIP). We watch a *lot* of VCR's.

**What are you reading right now?**

I have a business book on my night table and the novel "Gone Girl" which I haven't read yet. I get TONS of magazines b/c I like the quick short read of lots of different information.

**What's next for you?**

I'm at the start of a new chapter, which is exciting! The Proud Flower is always growing and morphing so there I can focus on the adventure of new possibilities and change which will allow me to bring more beauty and joy to my customers through our creative gift of personalized flower design.

We tried a new program for Waterbury WinterFest this year that I'd like to do again in the spring called, "Players, Poets, and Posies", where local poets read found or original poetry while a 6 piece jazz combo improvises with the reader in the flower shop.

And I have Jazzaoke twice a month! It's such great thing -- the pure joy of music and people being themselves, with all kinds of singers fronting the jazz band. It's magic! It's in Barre on the 12<sup>th</sup> and in Waterbury on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

