

Christine Conniff

In 1998 Christine Conniff was busy promoting and selling her basketry when she became friends with fellow artist Marianne Ives on the crafts circuit. The two decided to develop a venture together, thus the idea of the Shelburne Arts Cooperative was born. Calling upon her wide network of local connections, it wasn't long before six other artists signed on to the idea enabling the Cooperative to officially open its doors in August of 1998.



Of the eight, only Christine had previous retail management experience. Jumpstarting the organizational side of the coop fell to her including the development of inventory and bookkeeping systems, training members how to run a retail operation, and a host of other functions necessary to running a bricks and mortar operation. While she had hoped to be hired on in a paid position, it was decided that the co-op could only afford to give her a dollar an hour during those first six months! Gradually more members with retail experience joined enabling Christine to reduce her hours and share the many demands of the Cooperative with her colleagues.

Entrepreneurship runs in her veins: her father worked for 35 years at a large furniture, rugs and appliance retailer in the New Haven, Ct. area before starting his own family business, a colonial gift shop, in 1959. After finishing her freshman year at college, Christine worked at numerous venues (Yale Co-op, Yale University, radio station WAVZ, Peabody Museum of Natural History) in Connecticut before marrying and moving to the Cambridge area in the late 60's. After the marriage ended she studied black and white photography and worked at a high-end framing shop.

Life took a new direction with the birth of her son at 35. She moved to Cape Cod to be near some friends during the early 80's, but found the housing market too unstable to settle down long term. A new relationship propelled her westward to Greenfield by the time her son was 4 years old, but not before she learned the craft of basket making, something she could make at home while watching her son. She started doing craft shows and teaching workshops in western Mass, relocated to Shelburne Falls opening her own studio in the Salmon Falls Marketplace in 1985, and quickly became part of a growing community of artists there.

Teaching, crafting, raising her son as a single mother and earning a living in the world of retail (Green Fields Market, the Up Country Store and Greenfield Visitors Center) kept her busy through the 1990s. Courses taken at Greenfield Community College led to a graphic design degree and drew her creatively towards color photography. She continues to produce prints of local scenes in Shelburne Falls which are often in demand by the rising numbers of tourists in the area each year.

Unfortunately Christine developed carpal tunnel syndrome in both hands, impeding her basket making. Although she had an operation that alleviated the painful symptoms, she now prefers to make beaded jewelry and mini baskets, small items that allow her to play with color and texture and are less physically taxing. Her grown son, Andrew, and his wife now live in Seattle, WA. After living 27 years in Shelburne Falls, it became unaffordable and Christine recently moved to Greenfield, but hopes to reside again in Shelburne Falls sometime in the unknown future.