A Stitch in Time

In the Deep South, on the banks of the Alabama River, generations of women share and preserve their cultural history with needle, thread, and most importantly, love.

By Deborah L. Martin

Photography by Steve Pitkin, Pitkin Studio

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION/OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION.

In the wine world, terroir refers to the environment in which an item is produced—the unique flavor imparted by factors such as topography, climate, and soil. Though it is not a term commonly used in the world of art, in many cases it is true that a thing—whether a painting, a piece of pottery, or a quilt—could not be produced anywhere else in the world, but at its point of origin. Gee's Bend is such a place. The quilts invite the viewer into a world of both struggle and joy and invoke an emotional response that comes from a place of empathy and the deep understanding of what it means to be human. The history of Gee's Bend is fraught with the pain of enslavement and extreme poverty, but from that experience comes a tale of joy, resilience, and triumph of the human spirit that can only be told by these artists, in this place, and in this time.

A Painful History

The town of Boykin, also known as Gee's Bend, is located on a large horseshoe-shaped turn of the Alabama River in the Southwestern part of the state. The land was settled by Joseph Gee of North Carolina in 1816. He brought 17 enslaved men and women with him to Alabama and established a large cotton plantation on approximately 6,000 acres. He eventually passed the land to his two nephews, Sterling and Charles, who subsequently relinquished the property, along with 98 enslaved people, to a relative, Mark H. Pettway, to settle a debt in 1845. In the following year, the entire Pettway family moved from North Carolina to Gee's Bend. Over 100 enslaved people made the journey from North Carolina to Alabama, on foot, to join those already living and working on the plantation. As was the case across the South, the enslaved were forced to take the surname of their enslavers, so Pettway became the family name of the Black residents of Gee's Bend, even though they came from diverse backgrounds and families.

Free, But Not Free

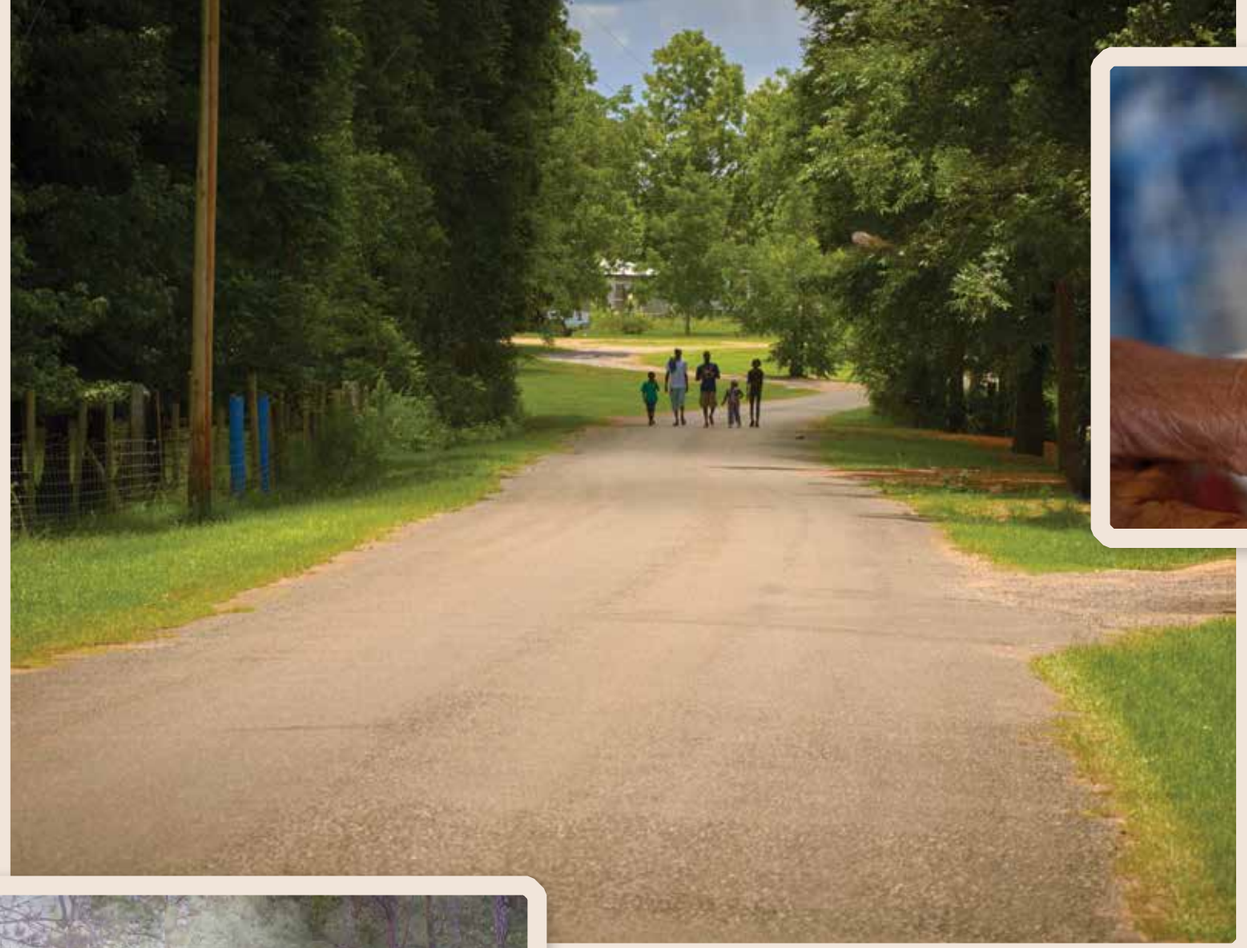
After Emancipation, many of the formerly enslaved families remained on the land, working as sharecroppers for the Pettway family. In 1895, the white Pettway family sold the property, and subsequent owners continued the abusive sharecropping system for the next several decades.

For the struggling community, the Great Depression brought even more pain. Already at a disadvantage, the economic downturn forced the residents deeper into debt. In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Resettlement Administration as a response to the extreme poverty in farm communities, and Gee's Bend quickly became one of the largest and most ambitious projects of the program.

In 1937, the federal government purchased the former Pettway plantation, which had grown to approximately 10,000 acres. The Resettlement Administration and its successor, the Farm Security Administration, established a cooperative farming association and other community services and built "Roosevelt houses," which residents could purchase with low-interest government loans. This meant that residents could remain on the land where most of their parents and grandparents had been born, and importantly, cultural traditions like quilting had a chance to thrive. Though help had come, the town remained isolated, and its residents had to be self-sufficient. The only way to conveniently access the services of Camden, the largest nearby town, was by ferry.

When the fight for Civil Rights took hold in the 1960s, the white officials of Camden realized that they would lose elections should the Black residents of the county have access to voting. They cut the ferry service so that residents couldn't get to the polls in the Camden courthouse. Ferry service between Gee's Bend and Camden would not be restored until 2006.

In February 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in Gee's Bend. At the time, the population of the county was 80 percent Black, yet there were no eligible Black voters registered. In his speech, King said, "Don't let anybody make you feel that you don't count. I want you to know that you are somebody, and you are as good as any white person in Wilcox County!" Many residents marched with King in Camden and later joined him in the historic march from Selma to Montgomery in March of 1965. At his public funeral in Atlanta in 1968, his casket was drawn through the streets of Atlanta by two mules from Gee's Bend.



Quilting For Freedom

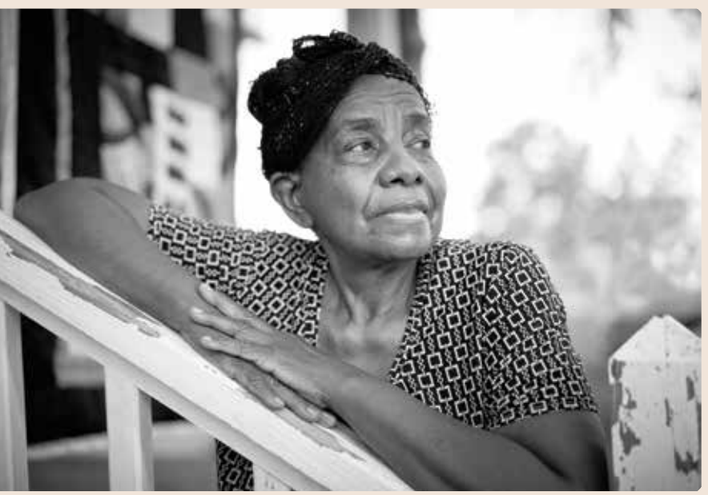
In 1966, more than 60 quilters from Gee's Bend and surrounding communities met in Camden's Antioch Baptist Church to found the Freedom Quilting Bee (FQB), which quickly grew into a thriving organization that held contracts with New York decorators and stores to produce made-to-order quilts, inspiring a national revival of interest in patchwork. Eventually, they were able to build a 4,500-square-foot sewing center, allowing for direct-to-consumer sales. Contracts with Sears and sales to department stores of easy-to-assemble, small-sized baby quilts sustained the FQB for almost twenty years, creating jobs in the community.

Generations of women in Gee's Bend have been piecing together scraps of fabric and clothing in abstract designs that had never been expressed on quilts before. They created a new visual language and continue to write a history of American art that has always existed and has only recently been acknowledged. Today, Gee's Bend quilts are shown in museums all over the world. The head curator of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Margaret Lynne Ausfeld, explains why the quilts are part of the museum's permanent collection. "While Gee's Bend quilts are included in the collections of museums the world over, having them in our museum in Alabama allows them to be appreciated not only by the public but by the artists and their descendants. The MMFA has collected these quilts and others from West Alabama for the past two decades. Both powerful works of art and potent examples of material culture, they deepen the museum's capacity to celebrate the breadth of the American art history narrative and the complexity of Alabama's cultural history."

SUPPORT, VISIT, AND LEARN

Here are some of the many ways to support the artists and community of Gee's Bend.

- **VISIT GEE'S BEND** is a one-stop website with information about events, history, and how to shop for Gee's Bend quilts. ***geesbend.org***
- The **GEE'S BEND QUILTING COLLECTIVE** sponsors several retreats per year where attendees can immerse themselves into the world of Gee's Bend quilting. ***geesbendquiltingretreats.com***
- **SEW GEE'S BEND HERITAGE BUILDERS** is a 501(c)(3) dedicated to preserving the culture and supporting and empowering creative entrepreneurship. ***sewgeesbendhb.org***
- **SOULS GROWN DEEP** is devoted to the artistic recognition of Black artists from the American South. They promote visibility, scholarship, and education about Black contributions to art history, and they foster economic development and racial and social justice. ***soulsgrowndeep.org***
- **FREEDOM QUILTING BEE LEGACY** is dedicated to sharing the historic and groundbreaking work of the original Freedom Quilting Bee. In addition, they offer economic opportunity to a new generation of quilt artists. ***fqblegacy.org***
- Every autumn, the **AIRING OF THE QUILTS FESTIVAL** draws international quilters to Gee's Bend. Sponsored by Sew Gee's Bend Heritage Builders, Souls Grown Deep, and Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy, the one-day festival includes workshops, tours, exhibitions, and storytelling, with local stars of the quilting scene. ***airingofthequilts.org***
- **VACATION WITH AN ARTIST** sponsors 3-day immersive stays with master Gee's Bend quilters Marlene Bennett Jones and Loretta Pettway Bennett. ***vawaa.com***



Marlene Bennett Jones

MARLENE BENNETT JONES was raised on a farm in Gee's Bend. After high school, she went on to study electronics and became an aeronautical electrician for firms like Beechcraft and Lockheed Martin. She returned to Gee's Bend to help care for her mother, Agatha Bennett, who was ill with Alzheimer's, and it was then that she returned to quilting. Her work is featured in museum collections from Alabama to New York to London, and she, along with Loretta Pettway Bennett, is the host of Vacation with an Artist.

As told to Deborah L. Martin

When I was a child, the women in the community would get together. After they put us on the school bus, my mother and three or four other women would meet at each other's houses, and they would quilt. When we got home from school, they might let us mess around on the end of the quilt and try to play with it. But most of the time, we would go underneath the quilt and play. It was traditional that if you grew up in Gee's Bend, there were certain things that you learned how to do, like quilting, cleaning the house, and taking care of your siblings. We did a lot of patching, like when pants got ripped.

After graduating from high school, there were no jobs, so we migrated North to find jobs. But if anyone would have told me that I would be picking up a needle and thread, I would have said no, that's not Marlene. But I got involved again in the year 2000 when my mother got sick with Alzheimer's. I remember sitting in the room with her, and she was just moving her fingers and her hands, and I didn't know what she was doing. I asked my brother about it. He said, "Well, back in those days, they used to quilt a lot, and they used to patch." So, I got some scrap material, anything that I could get my hands on. I laid them across the bed, and she started pressing the material out with her hands. She couldn't really talk, but I could see it in her eyes. I saw something there. So, late at night, I would get up and go into the room with her and start piecing up quilts. And that's how I got started.

I started with a little throw to put across her bed. The first one that I really quilted, I didn't know what to do because back then, they used to hang the quilt from the ceiling by a rope to stretch it. But I said, Marlene, if you can help build an airplane, you should be able to come up with some kind of solution here. My father had a walker, so I got a pair of his suspenders,

and I hooked them together to stretch the quilt a little bit. I couldn't get the proper stretch that I wanted, but this is how I got started. I would just sit there all night and quilt and quilt in my mother's bedroom, which was what we called a 12-foot room. All those houses were called Roosevelt houses. And now, to have quilts hanging in a museum, let me put it to you this way. From the cotton field to the museum, that sums it up for me.

When I'm dealing with material and making a quilt, it's like communicating with humans. I get all the colors, and I lay them out, and see who's going to get along. And when I get to the point where they can't come to an agreement, I have to bring a mediator in. I bring in a white piece, or a little piece of orange or red. It's important that my pieces communicate together. If they can't get along, I take that block and throw it in the corner. And then I go back and get all those blocks and put them together and see if they're getting along now. One lady in Gee's Bend told me, "Marlene, when I look at your quilt, my God, I think you're mixed up in the head." I guess the best artists are mixed up in the head a little bit. I think we are just weird people.

I create what's coming out of my mind. I don't do pattern quilts, that's not me. I'm looking at Goodwill, Salvation Army, estate sales. When I see a pair of pants or a dress that someone has worn, I'm wondering, *where has this piece been? What part of the country have they traveled?* I don't know where they came from, but wherever it is, there's a history there.

When I see a quilt hanging on the wall, I take my eyes directly to the left. And then I focus on the center. Now, if the center got my attention and the left got my attention, then the quilt got me, okay? And I noticed some of the older quilts that my parents made back then, they used old clothing, and whatever they could get. Even back then, it seemed like they knew how to make the material talk to each other, and it's just traditional. If you came from Gee's Bend and you figure it out, you will know a Gee's Bend quilt.

Our quilts, they're not symmetrical. When you see them, you can tell that we didn't do a proper measurement on them. If someone said, "Give me a 75-by-80," then I would do that. But one side is going to be a little bit off. So that's another way you can tell that it's a Gee's Bend quilt.

There was an old commercial that was about the 3 Ps. Well, I do the 3 Ps: first, I have to have patience. I have to have the passion. And of course, I have to have pride. And those are my 3 Ps.

MORE ON

Marlene

www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/marlene-bennett-jones

Loretta Pettway Bennett

LORETTA PETTWAY BENNETT grew up learning quilting from the women in her family. She traveled the world with her husband, a veteran who did three tours in the armed forces, and during that time she did some quilting, but it was when she visited the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to see the *Quilts of Gee's Bend* exhibition that she really began thinking of quilting as fine art. Loretta is the sister-in-law of Marlene Bennett Jones, and together they host Vacations with an Artist, an opportunity for quilters from all over the world to learn about the quilting traditions of Gee's Bend.

As told to Deborah L. Martin

Like most who grew up here in Gee's Bend, I started when I was a child. My early memory is from when I was about 5 or 6 years old, when my mom used to have us threading needles for them. That's how they kept us busy and inside so they could see where we were. And I started even from then, picking up little pieces, trying to sew it like the women did. I think I started loving it because at the age of about 12, that's when I made my very first quilt. It was around 1972 or 1973, and it was a flower garden pattern, a very complicated quilt for a 12-year-old. I have always been that way. I love challenging myself. If I see it, I think I can make it. I made my first double wedding ring quilt in the 90s, when I was 30-something.

I got married at 18 to Marlene's brother. He was in the army, stationed over in Germany. When I went over there, of course, there wasn't a whole lot to do. We were in a remote area, kind of like Gee's Bend, where you only get one or two channels on TV, and they were all German. So, what do I do? I started making a flower garden quilt. And I still have that one. It's in the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York.

At that point, I was still into pattern quilts because that's all I ever knew. After we came back stateside, we were in El Paso, Texas for two years. I was kind of dabbling in clothes, making little shirts for my older son and dresses and skirts for myself. After two years, we were shipped back to Germany. I made a few quilts on and off, small things. And then back to El Paso again. So, I wasn't making big quilts, I was making smaller things like baby quilts.

There was one that I made when I was in high school. Me and some girls from here in Gee's Bend, we made our home economics teacher a quilt for her first grandchild. It was by a pattern also. It had a clothesline with baby clothes, and it had the sun on it, with an appliqué bird on a fence. I think I was 15 at the time. So, I made a pattern of that quilt. I kept that pattern, and I guess I made close to 100 quilts like that. And I would make the little overalls different, the little dresses on there for the girl.

At first, coming out of high school, seeing the women here, that's what they did mostly, pattern quilts. I know we had some quilts that were abstract, that they made using what they had, because they couldn't afford to buy material. But in the late 1990s, that's when all the buzz was going on. My mom had a Pine Burr piece on her chair, and I would see her working on it every time I came home. So, I asked her if I could take it back with me to see if I could make one. By this time, my husband had left the military, and we were in North Alabama. I figured out how to make it and from that I got a grant, and I made a Pine Burr quilt for the state of Alabama. We donated it a few years later to the state. (The state of Alabama is the only one to have a designated state quilt, and the Pine Burr pattern was chosen to honor the Black women of the Freedom Quilting Bee and their contribution to the Civil Rights Movement.)

I went to the first exhibition in Houston, and I was blown away, because the quilt that my mom had in the show, I could remember lying on that quilt. It was on the floor in our house. I left there thinking, *would I ever be able to have my quilt hanging up in a museum?* That's when I started thinking about more abstract patterns.

I always wanted to be a painter. I used to buy the little paint-by-numbers kits, and I loved doing that. I started sketching and I would collect the clothing, and color the sketch with the fabric that I had. And that's how I got into the more abstract designs. After I got into it, I said, well, I can't paint, but I can paint with cloth.

I collect the fabric and then I set it all up or tear it all up, and then I start laying it out. Even if you make blocks, you always start in the center and work your way out until you have your finished piece. And that may be because you only have a certain amount, so that's when you stop. It's almost like building a house. You have to lay the foundation.

I use a lot of work clothes. And usually, I'm repurposing things, sheets and curtains, tablecloth, old pieces of fabric that someone had in their sewing stash, and they may have passed and someone donated it. Some of the quilts you may see a small pocket, those are my son's jeans.

Our quilts, you're not going to find them perfectly squared off. Some of that is due to the clothing or even the fabric itself, because we do a lot of tearing. And in the stitching, you're not going to find 12 stitches within an inch. Most times we use white thread, and that is another defining mark of the Gee's Bend quilts.

There are some younger ones coming along, learning the traditions. And for the last three years, on Juneteenth, we've been doing a workshop for the younger ones here. Hopefully, we'll pass the tradition on, maybe not to all, but one or two may come out of there. I'm very positive about it continuing.

MORE ON

Loretta

ETSY: sewloloshop

Claudia Pettway Charley

CLAUDIA PETTWAY CHARLEY is a fourth-generation Gee's Bend quilter, though she didn't come to quilting until her 30s. She is the daughter of Tinnie Dell Pettway, and together they founded Sew Gee's Bend Heritage Builders to protect the legacy and the quilters of Gee's Bend, and to open opportunities within the community. Claudia's daughter Francesca is carrying on the family tradition as a fifth-generation Gee's Bend quilter.

I was a late bloomer, I did not really do my first piece until I was in my 30s. I was born in 1965, and I grew up in a house in Gee's Bend where everybody lived together. I had my grandmother, my mother, my mother's sister, and then there was me and my boy cousins. My grandmother had the quilting frame in the living room. I would play underneath it like it was my dollhouse. I would watch the needles coming through, trying to figure out where it's going to come next, which I guess is very dangerous. And they would be there talking and singing, and I thought it was really cool.

Everybody would bring their quilt tops, and they would work on one at a time. Growing up, I didn't realize that we were considered poor. People would hear our stories and meet people throughout this Gee's Bend phenomenon, and they told us that our story was so inspiring. But a lot of times, when you're living it, you don't see it the same way. It was interesting to find out later in life that it was really a struggle. Everything we had to eat came out of the garden. My grandfather would hunt, and they did a lot of fishing back then. We had fields of corn, okra, watermelon, cantaloupe. You couldn't even see the other end. I remember as a child that getting up at five o'clock in the morning, dew was still on the ground. It was intense labor. The only day that we rested was on Sundays.

Quilt by Claudia Pettway Charley and Tinnie Pettway

Quilt by Claudia Pettway Charley

The community was close. We didn't really have anybody else to depend on because everybody else forgot about us down here. They left us to fend for ourselves. And too, they wanted us to be cut off. They stopped the ferry so the people in Gee's Bend couldn't get across the river to vote in Camden, the county seat for Wilcox County. There was only one way in and out of Gee's Bend, and if you didn't have any transportation, which a lot of people didn't have back then, then you were stuck. I guess it's the same today, just wrapped in a different package. The package now is just a little bit prettier, but it's the same thing.

I don't think my grandmother and my mom and other people thought about art when making a quilt, but when you think of art and music, those are things that come from the soul. No one else can control your soul. Your interpretation is entirely yours because it's truly from your heart. Being able to use what you have and create something; people can't take that away. And no matter what type of struggle you're having, that's something you can always do that will be totally your own. And that's what the strength of art and music could be, because you're writing your own story the way that you see it to be. And it doesn't matter really what anybody else thinks, either way, it's still your story.

I think staple Gee's Bend patterns came from things that we saw and the way that my grandmother and my mother's grandmother lived life. For instance, the Housetop, when they looked at the top of their house, that's what they envisioned. And so that right there was an original simply because of what they saw back then. And then they have this pattern called Courthouse Steps. No one has told me this, but when I see the Courthouse Step pattern, my mind tells me that, "Okay, well, you all would not allow us in the courthouse to vote, but you surely cannot stop us from making our own pathway." And we made it through that quilt pattern. That's my interpretation of the struggle of trying to get into a building to vote to have the same rights that anybody else would have.

Quilt by Francesca Pettway

We didn't live in a perfect place. And therefore, our quilts with all the different dimensions and abstracts, which you can call hits and misses, it's simply because we worked with the knowledge and the materials we had at the time. You can't duplicate that. To some people, when they come to our community, the whole community itself could look abstract.

We've always had a business in Gee's Bend called That's Sew Gee's Bend. People were coming to the community and taking advantage of us. We needed them to understand that there were people within the community who knew what was going on and we weren't going to stand for it. So, we promoted and marketed and built websites. As a matter of fact, we were some of the first companies in Gee's Bend to do a website of our own. We helped people sell their quilts and dealt directly with museums and galleries. During this time, my mother and I were talking about a nonprofit because when we started doing these exhibits, there were a lot of people who wanted to support Gee's Bend, but they *only* wanted to support Gee's Bend.

Quilt by Claudia Pettway Charley

Quilt by
Tinnie Pettway

So my mother, Tinnie Pettway, and I, co-founded Sew Gee's Bend Heritage Builders. Some of our main missions are to empower entrepreneurship, and we do a lot of collaborations with fashion designers and retailers. It's so that nobody else can just come in and think that they can just take over. Now organizations and companies have a direct contact to Gee's Bend through our nonprofit organization. We are transparent in what we're planning to do with those funds so that they can see that their financial donations are coming directly to Gee's Bend. And that's different because a lot of times when you give to an organization, you have no idea where the money goes.

We empower entrepreneurship, we are enhancing our infrastructure in the community, and we celebrate our artistic traditions of who we are and who we always have been. Those are our three mission statements. We now have companies like Adidas that we work with, and that's really big right now. We are one of the main sponsors for the Airing of the Quilts Festival, which is four years old this year. Adidas gave us a donation, and they're going to be one of the main organizing sponsors for the event this year.

We are very, very excited about building those types of relationships. We're more interested in a longer-term relationship where you get to know the community, where you yourself can see why you want to give and how you can really support our vision. We have some other things planned that Adidas is helping with. We're trying to get a building and infrastructure for the quilters. We can have a place where we can go every day. Sisters are doing it for themselves. That's the whole idea. We are really, really excited about being able to bring this to our community.

I always tell people that when you get a Gee's Bend quilt, you have four outlooks on life. All you have to do is turn your quilt around four different ways. And each way you turn it is going to give you something different. Four different outlooks. Even when you look at yourself in the mirror, you only have one reflection. But with Gee's Bend, it's totally different.

MORE ON

Claudia

ETSY: geesbendplace

Francesca

ETSY: geesbendway