

When I look back on my first few years as a member of The Friends of The Origami Center of America, they seem to be sort of fuzzy. I joined in 1986, and started attending monthly folding sessions right away. I was a very beginning folder, and knew no one else in the organization. I remember sitting in the back of the room trying my best to follow the instructions of Michael Shall and Alice Gray, among others. They (those brave enough to teach) seemed quite intimidating. How did they know what to say? And those who followed the instructions easily were even more intimidating. How did they know what to do? People were very helpful, but I felt that I'd wandered into the middle of a movie, while everyone else in the audience had been there since the opening credits.

When they talked about the coming convention, they emphasized that you should be careful not to get in over your head. I took that very, very seriously because I was determined to graduate to intermediate models. I remember how much I practiced preliminary and waterbomb bases so that I could do them quickly from memory, and how often I tried the bird base, sometimes getting it right, sometimes sitting in frustration.

At the last monthly folding session before that first convention, which was to be held in the children's lunchrooms at the American Museum of Natural History, Michael announced that they needed volunteers to come in the day before to help with collating papers, etc. I took the day off from work, and showed up at the Museum, eager to help, and perhaps even more eager to find out how I could learn the beginning of the movie. Michael and Alice greeted me kindly, and quickly assigned me to a collating table. The Friends office was then in the space that had been Alice's until she retired, in the corner circular turret on 77<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park West. You had to go through an unmarked door, then through a rather deserted and poorly lit storage area, and then into the office, which was a wonderland. It was a circular office, with high ceilings and huge windows on all sides, and an amazing view of Central Park. The cooling breezes from the park helped to make the temperature tolerable during the hot summers – the office was not air-conditioned, along with most of the Museum in those days. The most intriguing part of the office was bug-land, a dark section in the back of the office. Alice was an entomologist, and had a collection of such exotic pets as tarantulas and hissing cockroaches. (I can remember a guard taking me aside as I entered the Museum and whispering to me, "Watch out when you go into the office ... Alice says that there's a tarantula loose." And of course we all knew that Alice had spread the warning not because she was afraid that the tarantula would harm us, but that we might inadvertently hurt one of her pets.)

There were tables set up outside the office, and I worked with a couple of other volunteers sorting the attendee lists that were to be included in the survival kits. One of the highlights of my volunteering session was following Michael to what we now call Support Services at the Museum. Michael was extremely hyperactive. He did not walk – he strode. And he did not stride moderately – he strode fast. He brought me through the labyrinth that was the Museum basement, racing past carpentry shops and electrical closets, around mail rooms and locker rooms, until we arrived at the copy machines. He set me up to make copies, and then left. I had no idea where I was – I wasn't even yet sure where the office was! But everyone at the Museum knew Alice and Michael, and kind guards and behind-scenes workers sent me from milestone to milestone ("go right at the elephants, then left at the Indians, and then ask the next guard") until I found my way back.

When the convention started I helped Martha Landy with registration, an excellent introduction to volunteering. Martha was a gentle and articulate guide, and registration

was a great way to meet new people as they picked up their nametags. But I have to admit that I have no real idea of how many classes there were, or how many people attended, although I've been told there were 200-250 people. I remember that they were crammed into a dozen or so small classrooms, but what I recall most are a few snippets. I remember a man named Terrell Hayes, a lawyer/professional clown/paperfolder, entertaining the people who waited on line by juggling and telling jokes. I remember that in order to take a complex class you had to get past questioning by Michael Shall and Ron Levy. I remember watching David and Don Shall help Ted Bond build the 'Big Board,' the oversized schedule that would hang on the wall, using brown wrapping paper and handwritten sheets with class names. They, like the other volunteers, seemed to be having a wonderful time, with much muttering, and as much laughter. I also recall a mountain of shoe boxes, which Alice and a few others collected from shoe stores all year and then brought to convention so that attendees would have something to put their models in. (There were lots of stories about the difficulties in corralling a carload of loose shoe boxes, and one year a member's car was broken into when a thief thought the expensively-named boxes still contained the expensive shoes.)

I don't remember what models I learned, and I don't remember which people I met that year. I do remember starting to feel more comfortable with origami, and with origami people.

Lillian Oppenheimer started having gatherings at her home (first on Gramercy Park, then 11<sup>th</sup> Street, then Union Square) very soon after she discovered origami. When she founded The Origami Center in 1958 the gatherings gradually became meetings, and soon regularly scheduled monthly occurrences. Larger gatherings were held periodically, especially when Fred Rohm could make it into New York from Pennsylvania. *The Origamian* refers to the first ever American origami "conference" on November 6, 1962. A second gathering, now called a convention, was held on October 31 – November 1, 1964, and attracted 17 people. Conventions continued, each year getting larger. By 1978 there was an official listing of the 50 attendees. Everyone learned each model together – there was one large room, and a teacher in front.

By the late 1970's the conventions were getting too large for Lillian's home. At the same time, Lillian was getting older and concerned about a permanent home for her library. Michael Shall, Alice Gray and others started working to establish a formal non-profit, to be called The Friends of The Origami Center of America. Because of Alice Gray's connection to the American Museum of Natural History (she was a recently retired entomologist), they had access to the Museum's meeting rooms.

The first convention at the American Museum of Natural History was held April 12 – 13, 1980. The attorney working towards our non-profit status gave a progress report, and there were two full days of folding. There was an Open House at Lillian Oppenheimer's on Friday and Saturday evenings, where people could get together informally and also shop, since the Museum did not permit sales of origami materials. For the first time, there were multiple simultaneous classes. By the following year, 1981, The Friends of The Origami Center of America was a legal non-profit corporation, and we held our first 'official' convention at the Museum. Four years later, The Friends signed a contract with the Museum, and gradually moved the contents of Lillian's library and collection of step-folds and models. Two years after that, Lillian sold the origami book and paper business to The Friends, and the transition was complete.

By my next convention, in 1988, I had become an active year-round volunteer, typing and editing articles for *The Newsletter*. Michael asked me to coordinate volunteers for the convention, which entailed taking names of people who had checked a box on their forms, and calling them to figure out where and when they could be assigned. Again, it was a great way to meet people; after talking to them on the phone, they were already buddies by the time I met them in person. I remember trying to call one man, the father of a folder in Ohio, to ask him about volunteering. He had offered to be in our most valuable volunteer category ... what we called a 'green boat,' or non-folding, full-time volunteer. But each time I called and asked for him, the person who picked up the phone would curse at me, and then hang up! After this happened four or five times, with the curses escalating in volume and creativity, Michael called him. When the person on the other end heard a male voice he stayed on the phone. It turned out that he had just broken up with a woman who was harassing him, and apparently my voice was similar to hers. He was so embarrassed that he was more than willing to do anything we wanted that convention, and for years to follow!

The biggest change was that we had moved to a new venue. The prior convention, the last at the Museum of Natural History, had been cramped, and we had found new space at IS 44, a middle school down the block. It was a very major change: we had to pay for the rental of the gym and classrooms, rent tables and chairs, and move all our materials to the school just prior to the convention. Many meetings were held as we volunteers tried to figure out how to handle this move. I remember one meeting where we spent (literally!) hours trying to decide between providing water and seltzer, and another where we tried to figure out how we could coordinate a 'pot luck' Saturday night dinner for several hundred people. We had gotten to the point of deciding who would man the telephone hot line to coordinate the 200 tuna noodle casseroles when sanity returned. We realized that we would have to purchase main courses from an outside source – but we still encouraged people to bring 'finger foods' to share. People's interpretation of the term 'finger foods' was a bit loose – I can remember things like pasta salad and roast beef! Each year we were at IS 44 the 'snack table' was an asset – people truly enjoyed contributing the food, and it was a remembrance of our mom-and-pop days. But it was also a major hassle to keep the area stocked and clean, and it used up too large a percentage of our too small space. Each year at our meetings we fought about whether to eliminate the snack tables – some of the discussions matching the old seltzer/water debates. We did some other seriously strange things that we look back on and laugh at, such as renting lots of coffee urns, and hiring a teenager to make coffee in them. Imagine our shock when plugging in half-a-dozen urns in one room blew the fuses! So our teen had to move the urns to locations all over the school, and then lug them back when the coffee perked.

For the new venue more volunteers were needed – we had to move the tables and chairs up three flights of stairs to the gym, and then cover the unfinished wood tables with white butcher paper so that people could fold on them. The paper had to be replaced each evening ... folding wasn't hard on the covering, but a day's worth of sodas, chicken and 'finger foods' left them seriously grotty by nightfall. And speaking of grotty ... IS 44 was not exactly white-glove sparkling. This was in the days when NYC public school custodians had a rather lucrative union contract. They had lots of rights, such as the ability to rent out the school off-hours and pocket a large percentage of the money, but very few responsibilities. Floors only had to be washed once or twice a month, and bathrooms did not have to be cleaned except on schedule, an interesting concept when you have a school filled with pre-teens. In short, the school smelled; the floors were filthy; half the bathrooms didn't work and those that did had no toilet paper; and origami paper (and elbows) stuck to the unknown (or maybe we just didn't want to know!)

substances on the classroom desks. We had to send over an army of volunteers with Ajax and paper towels, to clean the classrooms the afternoon before the convention, and we had to purchase a case of toilet paper.

The survival kits were prepared at the Museum, in shopping bags, and had to be taken over to the school. We thought of many alternatives – a small van, carts, etc. – but Michael came up with the best answer. He procured a bunch of broom sticks, and gathered a group of volunteers. He placed a broom stick across each volunteer's shoulders, and then loaded shopping bags on the sides of the stick. They walked in a caravan over to the school, looking like a giggling parade of little Dutch children.

Michael was a wonderful teacher and leader, but he was not a planner. Things were purchased as needed, not ordered in advance. For example, he had indeed arranged for coffee urns, but forgot to order the coffee. When we realized that, just hours before the convention was to begin, someone had to run over to Zabar's, the local gourmet shop, and purchase very expensive coffee. In the beginning, Michael did almost everything, with help on tasks as he could find people willing and able. As the conventions grew, and the number of volunteers willing to take on areas of responsibility increased, Michael was persuaded to give up some of his jobs to others. I eventually became the coordinator, with Tony Cheng and Jean Baden-Gillette. Those first few years, though, it seemed that my primary job was to corner Michael and pull information from him about what needed to be done, which could then be passed on.

Gradually people came forward to take on specific areas. Kathleen O'Regan, whose full-time job was as a graphic artist, was the visual 'eye' of the organization. She had been working on many things that required artistic input, such as the Annual Collection and Newsletter, and she developed convention logos each year that were creative and unique. Now we needed to determine where to locate signs to identify areas and guide people to and from, so Kathleen took charge of signage. This prompted long discussions on whether signage was actually a word. (It is.) Jean arranged for equipment rental and food, and Tony set up the gym. deg farrelly used garbage can stands and foam-core shelves to create a model menu. Phyliss Meth brought over the contents of the Supply Center, and a team helped her set up her area. Michael emptied his closets, and created the first Gold Mine. Michael also sought teachers and figured out the schedule, using large sheets of foam-core and post-it notes, and Kathleen and I put it onto paper.

The registration forms were put into books, and Michael attached tabs on various locations of the sheets. He knew that a tab in the upper right corner of the sheet, for example, meant that the person had volunteered to teach, while a tab in the upper left corner meant that the person was looking for housing. This ingenious pre-computer method of multiple keys worked well until the number of attendees made it too cumbersome for anyone to handle, especially when many people needed information. I loaded the information onto a computer database, which expanded in functionality every year.

One area that remained Michael's until his death, however, was hospitality. The Michael Shall New York Tours for overseas visitors were famous, and justly so. People around the world still talk about their visit to New York, and the time that Michael ran them around all the tourist spots. He also arranged for housing ... in those days most people attending the convention were local, and those people who came in from out-of-town stayed at inexpensive hotels in the neighborhood or in members' spare rooms, sofa beds, and sleeping bags, all arranged by Michael. He was relentless in begging for sleeping

space – people who were known to have guest rooms knew that they could not avoid him, and that it was much easier to just say yes.

We stayed at IS 44 for five years. It was wonderful to have unlimited classrooms, but they were middle school rooms, with small desks, and, oh, did I mention, lots of dirt. Working with the custodian was difficult, to say the least. His rules (and prices) changed with his mood. The year that we misplaced one of the walkie-talkies we'd borrowed, and got billed a huge amount, was the last straw. In any case, we were outgrowing the school's gymnasium, and needed more space for sales areas and exhibition.

We started looking aggressively for another venue. Someone mentioned FIT – the Fashion Institute of Technology, and we sent an advance team over to tour it. Michael went, of course, along with Wendy Zeichner and Jean Baden-Gillette. The head of facilities, Bette LeVine, took them around, showing them the cafeterias that could be our main hospitality area, the classrooms, and other locations that were potential sites for exhibition, sales and dinner. The team was dazzled. The cafeteria already had smooth-top tables and chairs, so no rentals and no white butcher paper. The classrooms had desks and chairs built for adults. There was a spacious area on the top floor for exhibition and/or sales. Meals could be catered by the on-site firm. And if we scheduled the convention for the summer, we could use the dormitories for housing out-of-town attendees. And best of all ... it was clean. Michael stood in the middle of a hallway, opposite a bathroom, and gave an exaggerated sniff. "Smell that," he said to the team, grinning. "What do you mean, smell that," Bette said, indignantly. "My school doesn't smell." "Exactly," confirmed Michael, "your school doesn't smell." We signed a contract immediately.

When we started at FIT we felt that we were growing up. Planning became critical – you no longer could just run down the block to get some forgotten essential. Logistics (the art of moving things from point A to point B) was also critical – we needed to rent a van, and find volunteers to load and unload (something that was always very difficult – several years ago we switched to hiring a moving company, although volunteers still do much of the loading, unloading, staging and set-up). We had to design each area from scratch, figuring out where to put each component. Tony was in charge of designing and setting up the cafeteria/Hospitality Area. Jean worked on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, which was the Supply Center, Exhibition and Gold Mine for the first year, and Supply Center, Gold Mine and Vendor areas in subsequent years. In later years they switched stations.

The space had expanded again, and signage changed too. Wendy took that area over eventually, with new helpers each year for assistance in hanging her signs. We soon discovered that volunteers from outside New York could handle many of the areas of responsibility for the convention. deg farrelly, first from Pennsylvania and now from Arizona, has handled model menu for years. With the larger exhibition space, V' Ann Cornelius from California took over design and display, and drastically increased the sophistication. She designed plinths, shelves and stands, and other amazingly ingenious ways to effectively display exhibition origami. That first Gold Mine from Michael's closet was expanded by Tony and Maria Velazquez to include items specially purchased for the convention. Eventually Michael turned the teacher schedule over to Tony, Maria and me. Tony continues to use manual scheduling methods, until this year using Michael's original foam-core boards, but I've put the rest onto the computer. Mike Hamilton, Janet Hamilton's non-folding husband, started working with Phyliss. He came up with a user-friendly layout, and stays all weekend as the 'foreman' of her team of volunteers.

Wendy Zeichner became our 'efficiency expert,' using her wonderful analytical and creative mind to re-engineer different areas each year – for example, she and I designed folding shelf units that could be easily stored and then expanded into the Model Menu frame each year. Then she came up with her 'ticket id' concept, which assigned a single-digit number to each class that enabled us to determine number of periods, and starting and ending times, without having to record the specific information for each class. With that one number we could sort for ticketing, for big board, for schedules, etc., and typing into the database was drastically reduced while accuracy increased. Wendy continues to be in charge of ticketing, with an experienced team that returns each year. Volunteer coordination has gone through many hands, from Michael to me to Lin Balinsky to Scott Cramer to MaryJane Kettler to MaryAnn Scheblein-Dawson and now Toby Schwartz. Housing is handled by Martha Winslow-Cole in Atlanta, who receives, records, and juggles requests for housing from over 250 people.

We get a lot of first-time attendees each year, and we soon realized that they presented a unique problem. Showing up in a room full of 600-700 people, most of whom seem to know each other, can be daunting. One year I overheard a first-timer on the phone, calling home in tears saying that she was baffled, and was having an awful time. We realized that most first-timers adjusted quickly, and were thrilled by the experience, but a small percentage needed more assistance. We had used yellow ribbons on their nametags since Michael's time, we had a special first-timer fact sheet, and we had someone in charge of answering questions, etc., but we needed to do more. We tried setting up 'buddies' for them, but that didn't work because it was so hard to arrange meetings. Our first-timer coordinator (first Lin Balinsky, now Delrosa Marshall) initiated special orientation meetings, and we started putting blue Convention Pro ribbons on the badges of those who had agreed to make themselves available for help. Delrosa designed maps that explained the school's confusing layout. This year we initiated special 'express' and 'local' paths through Registration, so that experienced attendees can get their convention packages quickly, and with limited conversation, while the registration volunteers spend more time with the first-timers.

I handle office registration, and for a while I also supervised on-site registration, until I realized that the area was too important for part-time attention. Rachel Katz took it over, and has done an extraordinary job, processing hundreds of people in an amazingly short time. Her volunteers set the tone for the convention, welcoming people and keeping everyone calm. (This was a more difficult task some years than others. I can remember one year when FIT decided to arrange a fire drill just as we were starting to process registration. It was scheduled, but no one bothered to let us know in advance. And then there was 2004, when we were an hour late getting from the Home-Office with the registration envelopes, and Rachel taught t-shirt folding to keep the anxious attendees amused!). Our administrator, Joy Low, is involved with everything, especially the survival kits, and making certain that everyone's requirements, from volunteers to attendees, are met. Mette Pederson, Cynthia Fulbright and Ben Reed from Raleigh fold over 900 sailboats to put on nametags, which I generate (along with labels, meal, t-shirt and Origami Collection tickets) from my computer programs for the wonderful office volunteers to attach. June Sakamoto organizes a "collating party" where 40-50 people collate all the paper and materials in one day. Jean, Kathryn Wagner, Mike Montebello (Susan Dugan's non-folding husband) and Mike Hamilton now handle logistics, and Jean and I are the liaisons with the staff at FIT.

In August or September following each convention we hold a de-briefing meeting, where we discuss what worked and didn't, and review the suggestion forms from attendees. We make notes of changes we want to make the following year. Then in January or February

we start to plan, including deciding who will be our special guest and sending a formal invitation.

When Bette LeVine retired just before last year's convention, along with her Administrative Assistant, FIT hired someone brand-new for the job, Christine Ryan, and we were concerned that someone new would have difficulty wrestling FIT's academic bureaucracy. There were a few glitches, but eventually things were resolved. The staff for the Housing group has changed several times, although the current Summer Housing Coordinator, Nicole Martin-Lewis, has been there for many years now. Their staff adores our conventions and our conventioners – not only do we do virtually all the paperwork for them, but they love the origami gifts they get. They also enjoy the demographic variety of our attendees. The facilities, however, at times present a challenge – there are occasional problems with cleanliness or locks, and summer construction schedules have caused limitations. Generally, though, they're a bargain for New York, and the convenience of having housing across the street is wonderful.

The biggest change for 2005 was the destruction of the cafeteria we'd been using for our Hospitality Area. Originally there were two cafeterias, and we used one for convention and the other for Saturday night dinner. One had been converted to classrooms a few years ago, and since then construction had continued on new spaces – rumored to be a food court and a conference center. Hard facts were hard to find – configurations were stated, then changed; dates were absolute, then missed. Finally we were told that the construction was complete, but was the new space larger or smaller than the old? Don't know yet. Could we rent the food court, with its convenient tables and chairs? Don't know yet. How many tables would the new space fit? Don't know yet. Finally we were able to see the new spaces. Wendy, Tony, Kathryn, Delrosa and I visited the school many times, and discovered the good news / bad news of the new configuration. Good news: the space was modern and (marginally) large enough. Bad news: there were no tables or chairs (the food court is still unavailable); it was at the opposite end of the block-long campus from our sales areas and exhibition; and because of window walls and poor planning in locating electrical outlets, the layout design would be difficult. Wendy came up with an acceptable design, moving ticketing to the building lobby, and retaining the Model Menu and Information Desk in Hospitality. We found a rental company that could provide finished-top tables rather than rough wood ones (we really didn't want to go back to butcher paper!), and came up with new signage to direct people through the maze of buildings.

Another problem this year was that the in-house catering firm decided that they 'needed' to raise their prices. Our reasonably-priced (and mediocre) box lunches were going to double in price, and so would the cost of almost all food services. We decided that we couldn't live with these prices – there was no way that we could recommend that people buy a sandwich with a few slices of meat, plus a soda and cookie, for over \$15. We cancelled all food arrangements except for coffee, tea and juice in the morning (absurdly priced, but necessary), and asked Bob and Eunice Stack to compile a restaurant map and collection of menus. We also found a local Chinese restaurant willing to provide a 10-course meal for \$25 – an arrangement that quickly sold-out.

This year the movers showed up at Phyliss' on time, and quickly loaded The Source into the truck. On to the Museum, where Kathryn and Joy had pre-staged the materials to be added. We'd arranged for an additional van to move some of the awkward-sized materials, and both trucks left on time and arrived at FIT as planned. Christine had warned us that the Fire Marshal might be involved in our layout this year, something new in our experience with FIT, and, indeed, he showed up early in our set-up. Jean, Tony and

the two Mikes negotiated changes in the planned layouts, cutting the available number of tables. Toby's volunteer schedule was a smash hit – we had enough people where and when we needed – and everything was done on time. The new methods we'd incorporated in our office registration process after last year's problems meant that we actually showed up at FIT hours early, and I was able to trouble-shoot problems with our cash registers (who remembered that we needed special thermal paper for the Gold Mine register?). Our talented photographer, Susan Dugan, was already on-scene, recording the process when she wasn't helping with the un-loading and set-up (or running to Staples to buy the special thermal paper!).

By the time the 800+ people arrived for the convention (over 628 paid attendees, plus guardians and staff), all was smooth. Hundreds of volunteers had copied materials, collated paper, glued sailboats, added tickets to envelopes and alphabetized forms. 270 people had checked into FIT housing. The rented tables and AV equipment were set-up. 125 teachers were prepared to teach 243 classes. Volunteers were scheduled to monitor the model menu and exhibition, greet and teach the public, and sell materials. The model menu sparkled with the samples of models to be taught. 5,000 class tickets waited. Phyliss and her staff were ready in The Source, as were Tony and Maria in the Gold Mine. The vendors had their materials ready for sale. V'Ann put some final touches on the amazing Exhibition. Delrosa had her maps sorted for the First-Timers' Orientation.

Did the attendees who stood in line waiting for Rachel to open registration have any idea of all the work that had prepared this convention for them? Probably not ... we work hard to make it all look easy. When the doors finally opened, the effort was forgotten, and on both sides of the door we were ready to greet old friends and make new ones. We were united in enjoying this art and craft that we love, and that has brought us together. We'd made another origami convention.

*Thanks to Jean Baden-Gillette, Tony Cheng, Gay Merrill Gross, Kyoko Kondo, Martha Landy, Ron Levy, David Lister and David Shall for sharing their memories and materials with me for this article.*