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The **Stitching Life Stories Project** is a program of the Warren County Memorial Library with assistance from the Heritage Quilters. The North Carolina Arts Council, Division of the Department of Cultural Resources, funded this program.

**Warren County Memorial Library** seeks to be a library that is central to the life of the county and a destination of choice for the citizens; a library that meets the recreational and informational needs of the people who live and work in Warren County; a catalyst for growth and improvement in the county; and a library that represents the interests and history of the citizens.

Organized in 2001, the **Heritage Quilters** is a diverse group of women and men based in Warren and Vance Counties, whose mission is to support, encourage, and document quilting traditions and activities. In 2009 and 2011, the Heritage Quilters worked in collaboration with Warren County Memorial Library to document Warren County quilts. The quilters have staged quilt exhibitions biennially since 2002 and hosted quilt displays and programs in schools, community settings, and in conjunction with Preservation Warrenton. Currently, the quilters support a giving circle to strategically address community issues using their time, talent, and treasure.

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“Jazz Explosion” by Jim Colman

“Truth Be Told” by Belinda Mack Alston

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# stitching



# life



# stories

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## Acknowledgements

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We could not have done this project without the encouragement and coaching that Jane Ball-Groom provided in her *Inspire Creative Writing* workshops and her many one-on-one conversations with the writers. She gave us the confidence to keep writing and thinking creatively. We are deeply indebted to Hassie Boddy and Sauda Zahra for their inspiration and for sharing their wonderful quilts in Warren County. We recognize how privileged we are to have had their extraordinary quilts exhibited in our community. And Sauda offered everything needed to move forward with creating a story quilt in her *Narrative Quilt Development* workshop. The session was superb.

We cannot thank Sterling Cheston enough for the time and energy he dedicated to setting up the quilt

exhibitions. His thoughtful planning, precise measurements, and quilt placements resulted in truly stunning quilt presentations.

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This project would not have been possible without the support of Folklife Director, Sally Peterson at the North Carolina Arts Council, a Division of the Department of Cultural Resources. We applaud the North Carolina Arts Council for their vision and all of their efforts to create "a better state through the arts." Their confidence in our work fuels our collective imagination to see increasingly innovative ways of promoting and preserving timeless traditions.

Lastly, we are deeply appreciative for all of our ancestor quilters who labored long and hard, making both the finest quilts imaginable out of silks and linens and make-do quilts using scraps of cloth, old clothes, feed bags, and such. Whether making covers to keep bodies warm or fancy quilts to showoff talent and skills, there was always a little color and love thrown in, just for fun and to tell a story.

## Introduction

Storytelling and story writing are universal. They are art forms as old as human life and are used as conduits for sharing and passing down through generations beliefs and values, experiences, historical events, social conditions, and much more. Quilting, the stitching together of three layers of cloth, like story writing, has also played a central role in human life, with early forms of quilted clothing traced back to ancient Egypt.

The Stitching Life Stories Project brings story writing and quilting together. The project's overall aim is to increase awareness among the general public of the broad range of quilting styles and traditions and to explore the use of creative writing techniques to generate stories about family, life experiences, cultures, and special events. And finally, to use quilting as a platform for narrating personal and traditional stories in cloth.

In some way, every quilt tells a story. Whether the quilt recalls memories associated with its cloth patches, the comfort and warmth it provides on cold nights, or the "make do" values of the quilt maker, there is always something about a quilt that evokes a story. The story quilt, past and present, is a powerful and creative vehicle for understanding traditions, values, identity, and place.

Over the last 50 years, quilting as a craft and art form experienced a renaissance, with much of the rebirth driven by corporate and commercial interests, resulting in the production of a narrow range of mass-produced quilts. Through gallery displays and artist presentations, the Stitching Life Stories Project sought to bring before the public-at-large extraordinary quilts and quilters working outside of the contemporary quilting mainstream. The project featured

exhibitions of quilts made by two of North Carolina's celebrated quilters, Hassie Boddy of Granville County and Sauda Zahra of Durham. The project intends to bring attention to the numerous ways that quilts can document personal stories, significant events, and activities, while showcasing the artistic ingenuity of the quilt maker.

## About The Quilt Artists



### **Hassie Boddy**

refers to herself as a free-spirit quilter. Mrs. Boddy spent most of her adult life in Orangeburg, New York, where she worked as an occupational therapist at Rockland Psychiatric Center Hospital for 37 years. In 1988, Hassie, her husband, and mother moved to North Carolina where she connected with her family's roots in Granville and Person Counties. Quilting had always been a part of her life, but as she settled into North Carolina, her quilting moved from traditional forms to more

creative and interpretive expression.

Mrs. Boddy began felting wool cloth for piecing and adding wool appliqué designs. She taught herself reverse appliqué techniques and produced African masks, human figures, and ethnic designs in quilts. All of her work is hand

quilted. “Taste of Freedom,” shown on the previous page, is a fine example of her reverse appliqué work. This quilt represents her interpretation of a newly emancipated Black man.

“Slow Drag,” an appliquéd ballroom dance scene made with silks, linens, and lace, is a phenomenal piece. This quilt is modeled on a Miguel Covarrubias illustration in W. C. Handy’s 1926, Blues Anthology, and Hassie captures the spirit and mood of the era with attention to quilting details, such as stitching the trombone’s slide in the upper right corner of the



quilt. Hassie’s talents and skills matched well with the Stitching Life Stories Project, for her quilts are inspiring and are representative of personal and public narratives.

**Sauda Zahra.** A desire to express creativity has been constant throughout Sauda’s life and led to many creative

pursuits. Her creative journey has intersected with sewing, crewel embroidery, doll making, stained glass, and finally quilting. It is not surprising when Sauda first saw Hassie Boddy’s “Slow Drag” quilt, it had a profound impact on her quilting direction. Sauda says,

*“When I first saw ‘Slow Drag’, it seemed to take up the entire wall, and I decided then that I wanted to make quilts like that.”*

Sauda is a fiber artist who experiments with different fabrics and embellishments to add unexpected details to her designs as seen in the “Jazz Explosion” quilt. Sauda’s original designs are expressed as narrative, commemorative, and improvisational works of art.



Sauda Zahra is in the vanguard of American Quilters, reimagining the quilt not only as something to keep you warm in

body and spirit, but also the quilt as a bridge between the past and present, and a cultural mediator for the future. Sauda uses the quilt medium as a visual vocabulary to stimulate conversations between art and artist, and art and viewer. This is evident in her representation of the George Washington White House quilt, “Truth Be Told.” Sauda says,

*This quilt honors the 9 slaves whose legacies are etched in the first President’s Philadelphia House, and affirms their never-ending desire to be free. Their story would not be complete without shining a light on the hypocrisy of George Washington as president and slaveholder. While establishing a new democracy built on freedom, liberty and justice, Washington was building his personal economic wealth on the backs of slaves he deliberately denied those same rights.*

“Truth Be Told” exemplifies the meticulous research that accompanies her quilt making. Sauda brings this scholarship and deep expressions of creativity to the Stitching Life Stories Project.



## About Writer Jane Ball-Groom

As a renowned writer and writing coach, **Jane Ball-Groom** brings a plethora of experience and knowledge not only in writing but also in human services. Her years of experience working as a business administrator, experienced and proven grants writer, business developer, workshop facilitator, motivational speaker-life coach, and dedicated community volunteer proved to be invaluable to the success of the project. Just recently she created a new community initiative, entitled GENEAA – a genealogy-based, life skills enrichment initiative geared to generate personal development, engender learning, improve literacy, writing, critical thinking, and communication skills sets through ancestry.

Reading and writing has always been a personal passion for Ms. Ball-Groom. The Salad Pickers is her third publication. Previous books published are Yet, Another Day: Journey of My Soul and When the Rainbow is Gray. Engaging several Warren County families on a genealogical writing project, in 2014, she produced From These Roots – Their Voices: A Truly Amazing Grace, containing wonderful and exciting stories about Warren County ancestry.

Story writing is part of Jane Ball-Groom’s DNA. Teaching creative writing is second nature only to her imaginative, thought-provoking, and heartfelt story writing. In the Stitching Life Stories Project, Jane built the confidence of novice story writers to dive deep into their memories to create expressive narrative and encouraged experienced writers to take new and unexplored routes to new destinations of expression.

## About The *Stitching Life Stories* Project

There are four major components to the *Stitching Life Stories* Project: 1) hosting quilt exhibitions with quilt artist talks to raise awareness of the variety of quilt styles, approaches, and techniques and learn from quilters about their motivations for creating historical, art, and narrative quilts; 2) hosting creative writing workshops to support local writers and quilters on a creative writing journey to reflect, research, and write stories; 3) hosting narrative quilt development workshops to support writers and quilters to interpret narrative into cloth; and 4) supporting the creation of a collection of story or narrative quilts made by local quilters and writers.

Two quilt exhibitions were held at the Warren County Memorial Library. The project kick-off and first exhibition featured 29 quilts by Hassie Boddy in November 2015. Hassie showcased quilts featuring her wool appliqué, reverse appliqué, and exceptional embroidery skills. The second exhibition featured 28 quilts by Sauda Zahra in January 2016. Sauda's quilts included personal stories, civil rights, musical themes, and thought-provoking topics addressing slavery and lynching. Both exhibitions were highly regarded with over two hundred community members attending the events.

Jane conducted a series of three writing workshops from January through March 2016, and two additional follow-up sessions in April and May. Nineteen individuals participated in Sauda's Narrative Quilt Development workshop in January and fourteen writers and quilters continued with the *Stitching Life Stories* writing workshops with Jane Ball-

Groom. The Heritage Quilters provided workspace in the historic Aaron Hendrick House, Warrenton, NC, and assisted project participants in identifying aspects or themes of their life stories, then interpreting and translating them to cloth, and using basic quilting techniques to complete their quilts.

There were many positive unexpected outcomes throughout this project: the unbelievable excitement of quilters seeing Hassie Boddy's intricate hand stippling on her "Remembering Grandmother" quilt and the subtle quilting details in "Slow Drag" and "Taste of Freedom." The quilt exhibitions created an open space for reflective and honest conversations among Black and White community members as they reacted to Sauda's "Haunted By Our Heritage" quilt, which depicted a lynching. Most of all, it was the transformation of the project's contributing artists as they reached back into memories – some tragic, some joyful, and some instructive – to create a story quilt as a work of art that will be forever celebrated and cherished.

**Jereann King Johnson, Quilter**  
**Project Leader**  
***Stitching Life Stories* Project**

## Writing the Stories

I am proud to have developed and facilitated the *Inspire Creative Writing – Texturing Soul Workshop* portion of the Warren County Stitching Life Stories Project. Among goals set in place to develop and enhance creative writing skills was a focus on story development for transformation into a narrative quilt. Focusing on creative ‘textured’ writing styles, three goals were established enabling participants to: 1) enhance writing skills, 2) engender and engage expression, and 3) transform thought into written word.

Through the use of *Inspire Creative Writing* materials and hand-outs, which included PowerPoint presentations, daily agendas, notebooks, paper, pads, pens/pencils, calendars, file cases, and journals; the Stitching Life Stories participants were taken on various life journeys incorporating lively and thought-provoking discussions, reading, and dramatic skits about lessons and experiences from birth, childhood, teenhood, adulthood, and the seasoned essence of one’s senior years.

Within each writing session, the major focus was to engender purpose and bring forth passion, while learning the art of writing through soul texturing. Spirited conversations,

along with interactive and interpersonal exercises included “soul prompts,” themes, outlines, titles, character development, inducing imagery, creating structure, landscape and scene coloring, sensory perceptions; and studying good writing from various and diverse author subjects.

Working with the Stitching Life Stories participants brought not only joy and amazement; but also a plethora of exciting, textured, thought-provoking, and soulfully heart-rendering stories. Each one taking the reader on the author’s personal journey from historical ancestors, the trials and joy of a baby’s birth, the magic and wonder of childhood, cultures and legends, anxieties of young womanhood, transformative journeys, loss and redemption, challenge, triumph, and renewal.

While inspiring others was the goal of the *Inspire Creative Writing Workshop*, participating in this project not only heightened my own senses, but offered me a chance to become re-engaged and greatly inspired by the awesome and creative participants of the Stitching Life Stories project.

**Jane Ball-Groom, Writer  
Inspire Creative Writing Coach  
Stitching Life Stories Project**

## Moving from Narrative to Cloth

Stitching Life Stories Project participants had an opportunity to learn how to translate aspects of their written stories into narrative quilts by attending the *Narrative Quilt Development Workshop*. It was my honor and pleasure to facilitate this workshop and work with an enthusiastic group who were open to the possibilities of telling their stories in a new way. Many of the participants were not experienced in designing narrative quilts or thinking of cloth as a medium for visually telling their stories. However, any apprehension participants may have had in the beginning would disappear or diminish at the conclusion of the workshop.

The *Narrative Quilt Development Workshop* was structured to provide the participants with a conceptual framework for designing and making their narrative quilts. I shared a formula that I honed over eighteen years designing and creating narrative quilts. The formula consists of a series of questions that helped participants establish a clear path to guide them as they moved their stories from narrative to cloth and a nine-step process that provided the building blocks for designing their one-of-a-kind narrative quilts. During the workshop, participants were also able to view many of my narrative quilts, see how I incorporated the steps in my formula to tell the story I wanted to share, and ask me questions about my creative process.

It was my hope that the *Narrative Quilt Development Workshop* would give participants enough information to be able to design their narrative quilts after they left the workshop. As facilitator, I wanted to first instill in the participants the confidence to use their sewing and quilting

skills to create their narrative quilt. And secondly, encourage the participants to draw from their unique creative abilities to breathe life into their narrative quilts; the maker is the only one who can imbue this energy into their artwork.

At the conclusion of the workshop, each participant was asked to design a block that would become part of a collaborative quilt to commemorate the community formed around the Stitching Life Stories Project. Creating these unique blocks was a wonderful exercise for the participants to get their creative juices flowing and begin thinking about how they would apply what they learned from the workshop to designing their narrative quilts. Each participant's block revealed glimpses of them opening up, consciously or subconsciously, to seeing cloth and their creative abilities from a new lens.

I am pleased to see the outcome of the *Narrative Quilt Development Workshop* in the form of narrative quilts that are original and personal, and speak to us in a rich, textured, creative voice that is as familiar and comforting as the soft cloth used to create these amazing works of art.

Congratulations to all the Stitching Life Stories Project participants who made the commitment to be fully engaged in the various aspects of the project, and allow the project to enrich them in ways that will continue to unfold in their personal and creative lives.

*There will always be stories to tell and cloth to wrap them in.*

**Sauda A. Zahra, Fiber Artist/Quilter**  
Facilitator, *Narrative Quilt Development Workshop*  
Stitching Life Stories Project



# THE PEAR TREE

IHSAN ABDIN

Growing up in the South Bronx, New York City, gave me an adventurous, exciting, and fun-loving childhood. People in my neighborhood were close-knit. Everyone knew each other. In fact, my parents had grown up with some of the parents of my early neighborhood friends. Some of the teachers in my school had taught my mother. Everyone knew everyone. So for us kids, there was a sense of family and safety.

The neighborhood and surrounding areas were lined with tall rectangle shaped brick high rise tenement buildings; complemented with concrete sidewalks. The occasional patch of grass and strategically placed trees provided the only greenery unless you went to the city park. Each building had what seemed like a hundred peering eyes from the many windows encased in the tall structures. Women looked out these windows, keeping a careful watch on the neighborhood goings on; and on us children playing.

In the summer, groups of children hit the streets for a full day of activities including but not limited to riding bikes, jumping rope, and games of dodge ball. Neighborhood children hung out in peer groups of the same age range. Gender did not matter, at least not to us elementary school-aged kids. We had not yet separated into the different sexes. Our play pals were inclusive. We just wanted to be with friends and have lots of fun.



We did not require a lot of adult supervision because if you did something wrong, someone from the watching, peering window eyes would let the entire neighborhood know. Due to those peering window eyes, there was little room for doing things that might get you in trouble. If something did happen, the entire neighborhood would find out. The peering window eyes did their job well.

When becoming bored with our street games, we would slip out of the neighborhood beating the concrete pavement of the city blocks in search of adventure. Trips to the city park, a three or four block walk, filled our senses with greenery. Rolling carpets of neatly laid green grass were perfect for sitting, playing, and rolling on. We walked to the bread factory and once there, we could get free, freshly baked French rolls. On occasion, we walked to the Bronx Zoo, the longest journey from our neighborhood.

Our free-spirited hang-out peer group included those of us who lived no more than three buildings apart. Joe was the daredevil of the group. He was always egging us on for trying different things and making new discoveries. I think it was because he hung out with his older cousin who was adventurous. It was Joe who discovered the fruit tree growing in someone's backyard a few blocks away from our high-rise apartment. He discovered a house, and in the back of the house was a large pear tree. The pear tree and house were fenced. A sign on the fence read PRIVATE. To us kids it wasn't

about the sign. We knew we had a challenge and had to get to those pears.

Our first trip to the pear tree was for exploration purposes only. The house being set apart from the other homes, meant in our minds there would be no watching eyes. Alana, whom we called Lannie was the unofficial group leader. She made the decisions and we followed without too much question. She suggested that we come back another day and try our hands at getting some of those pears. Bunny, Joe's sister, was the quiet and sensible one. She said we needed a plan. After all, there was a fence that had to be climbed in order to get into the backyard, and furthermore, "How will we get the pears off the tree?" Irvin, another daredevil, was a pain in the butt for us girls because he always liked to pull on our pigtails or do something stupid that we girls didn't like. Like dangling worms in your face or putting his arm around your shoulder as if you were his girlfriend...eke! He was a real nuisance to us girls. Irvin said it would be easy for him to climb over the fence. When no other suggestions were offered from the remaining three in the group, we decided to plan another trip to claim our prize.

On our second trip to the pear tree, we were ready. Everyone managed to get over the fence. There she was our treat, pregnant with pears! But the pears could not be easily gotten at first. We threw sticks and stones to try and knock the pears out of the tree. For all of our effort, there was little luck to be gained. Finally, Irvin started climbing up the tree and onto a limb; shaking it until it gave up its fruit. Below, us kids ducked and dodged the falling fruit. 'Ouch' was occasionally heard as someone got hit from the falling treat.

When we felt we had enough, more than we could stuff into our pockets or carry in our hands, we would make our escape back over the fence and head home, biting into the hard pears and planning our next excursion back to the tree.

We never got into trouble or approached by the homeowner for stealing pears. We continued our other adventures in and around the neighborhood, but the pear tree was a found, delicious treasure. For the next two summers, we faithfully made our way back to the pear tree as often as we could.



**IHSAN ABDIN** grew up in the South Bronx in New York City, with two brothers and three sisters, watching her mother turn their out-grown and unused clothing into beautiful patchwork quilts, which inspired Ihsan in later life and led her on a quilting journey. In 1989, she relocated to Soul City, NC, where for the past 27 years she has worked in non-profit community development programs serving families, children, and youth. Outside of quilting, Ihsan enjoys gardening. She is a yoga and natural health practitioner and a member of an African drum and dance-performing group.



# BE STILL MY DANCING LIGHTS

BELINDA MACK ALSTON

**M**y father, two younger sisters, and I moved to sunny South Daytona Beach, Florida, from Brooklyn, New York, in the late 70s. In 1978, for our summer vacation, my sisters and I were visiting my uncle, a Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) minister in Kansas City. Needless to say, we went to church consistently; which was a little different from our normal lifestyle. We really enjoyed visiting family, making new friends, and participating in activities offered to young people at the church.

We returned home around the 1<sup>st</sup> of July to the sunny Florida shores. One Saturday after we returned home from Kansas, I asked if we could go to church. This posed a problem since Daddy wasn't a church-going man. He didn't like asking for directions, and finding an SDA church wasn't as easy as finding a Baptist Church. Although he was trying to please his girls, but his heart wasn't into driving around aimlessly, not knowing where he could find the church. He mumbled and grumbled and eventually we returned home. Being a typical teenager, I pouted, mumbled, and grumbled. After we got home, he was still trying to please his girls. He told us he had a surprise and said to change into comfortable clothes. Knowing about the surprise, my Mom stayed at home while my sisters, two cousins, and I went for a ride with my father.

It was a beautiful, sunny day in Daytona Beach. Dad drove the car downtown along Main Street. We passed by swaying palm

trees and brightly colored shops. We saw many people walking around in swimsuits and tourists were snapping pictures. The scene was typical of the hustle and bustle of the small business beach area. Dad stopped the car in front of a store called *Dimples Record Shop*. Standing there proudly, he said, "Girls, this is our record shop!" He named the store *Dimples* after my mother's nickname. When we were living in New York, dad worked as a part-time DJ, so it was natural he would open a record shop.



We were surprised and very excited about the family shop and forgot about the incident earlier in the morning of not finding the SDA church. Dad gave us the grand tour of the shop. Inside were shelves and boxes full of records and posters. He played several records for us and before we left the shop, I remember he played "Three Times a Lady" by the Commodores. Closing the shop for the day, he said we were going to the beach.

By the time we arrived at the beach, it was late afternoon. While beginning to fall behind the horizon, the sun was still shining and its radiating warmth felt wonderful on my skin. The soft breeze was blowing and you could smell the ocean. I was fascinated that you could drive your car right onto Daytona Beach, sink our feet into the cool sand, and walk into the ocean. The fact that we were non-swimming New Yorkers, recently transplanted to Florida, did not deter us from playing right where the bright sun had warmed the sand and where the cool waters met. The sprays of salty water splashed on our toes and ankles as we ran to put our feet in the water.