

Diva WEEKEND 2012

by Dena Fishbein

All of the women who attended Diva Weekend 2012 in Lafayette, California, agree: Being a self-employed, licensed artist can get downright lonesome sometimes. Which is why over 10 years ago, when Brenda Walton, Sheila Meehan, Kathleen Francour, Anne Higgins, Tina Higgins, and Dena Fishbein all found themselves connecting at a number of different design shows and events, they came up with the idea for an annual retreat that would serve as a time to create, share, and grow with one another as artists and as friends. The first Diva Weekend took place in 2003 in Laguna Beach, California, and has continued since at the various homes of the women who attend. They laugh, cry, laugh so hard that they cry, and create. In between they take field trips to local attractions, and cook up delicious meals. Read along to find out what makes this special tradition so invaluable to the six women who started it.



Don't be fooled by the title "Diva Weekend" — we are by no means divas. In fact, I'd like to think we're the furthest thing from it. The reason Brenda, Sheila, Kathleen, Anne, Tina, and I initially decided to get together for an annual retreat was simply to allow all of us to spend time away from our computers, drawing tables, and paint. As any artist or designer in the licensing business can tell you, the nature of the business can be pretty isolating. Not only do most of us work from our home studios, we do most of our business via email, phone, FTP, and Federal Express. We only meet with our clients face to face maybe once or twice a year. Oftentimes, licensing expos and design shows are one of the few places in which we can connect with our peers and friends in the field, and years ago we found that it just wasn't enough. We yearned to spend a more concentrated span of time together. Our retreats provide an uninterrupted opportunity to create and share with one another.





*“Whenever I’m feeling uninspired,
I will think of this weekend.”*
— Dena Fishbein

This year was especially notable because for the first time since we started Diva Weekend, we invited someone new to become a permanent member of the group — the lovely and talented Melissa Neufeld. We held a little ceremony for her in which she was welcomed and crowned as an official “diva.” She cried, and then we all cried. It was a beautiful and touching evening, and was definitely one of the highlights of our weekend. In the past we’ve also invited guests to join us, especially if someone could not make it to the retreat. This year we invited Jo Packham to attend, and I’m happy to report that it made our time together that much more fun.

This year’s event was held at my home in Lafayette, California. We plan our retreats several months in advance, sometimes even planning for the next event before the present one has ended! Each person brings one project idea, ranging in complexity and amount of time needed to complete it. If a project requires special materials, the person hosting it will often bring those materials for the entire group. We also send out a materials list via email ahead of time. When we arrive at our destination, the first thing we do is unpack the treasures we’ve brought from home (vintage wallpapers, scrapbooking papers, ribbons and trims, fabric, beads, and embellishments). We organize our goodies and supplies so that everything is visible and easily accessible. We loosely plan the order of projects, usually starting with the simplest one. After about three days of virtually non-stop crafting, we need a mental health break. This is when we take time to go on a field trip, usually to a local antique store, flea market, and out to dinner.

Speaking of the dinner, Brenda and Tina are generally our chefs extraordinaire, and they do an amazing job. We try to purchase our groceries ahead of the event, and Brenda makes all of us a detailed shopping list so that we can divide and conquer the grocery store in an efficient manner. We all try to pitch in with our favorite meals each year — steel cut oats for breakfast and panini's for lunch. This year, Tina brought a suitcase full of oranges from Arizona, and every morning we were treated to freshly squeezed juice; it was heaven.

Brenda also keeps notes of all the funny things everyone says during our time together, and at the end of the weekend she reads them out loud. It encapsulates the weekend for us, and is hysterically funny — tears-running-down-our-cheeks funny. It's our final bonding moment, and afterward we all hug and say our goodbyes.

Being part of this very special group is a marvelous, magical, and otherworldly experience. I love being in the company of this group of immensely talented, inspiring, and amazing women. There's a wonderful spirit of camaraderie and sharing when we're together, and the air is full of possibilities. We teach each other new techniques. We encourage and cheer each other on. It's a wonderful environment to expand our horizons, and I always leave our events feeling totally re-energized.

If you are wishing you could be a part of a similar group, we encourage you to start one of your own! It takes such a small effort, and the rewards are tremendous. It's definitely one of the highlights of my year, and I can't wait to be in the company of these beautiful, generous, and loving women again. It's a wonderful tradition, one that continues to enrich us and to reinforce the roots of our friendship.

• • •

WHERE WOMEN CREATE would like to thank the women of Diva Weekend 2012 for their involvement in our Winter Issue. For more information, visit their websites: denadesigns.com (Dena Fishbein), brendawalton.com (Brenda Walton), kathleenfrancour.com (Kathleen Francour), annekeenanhiggins.com (Anne Higgins), mhslicensing.com (Tina Higgins), and melissaneufeld.com (Melissa Neufeld).

