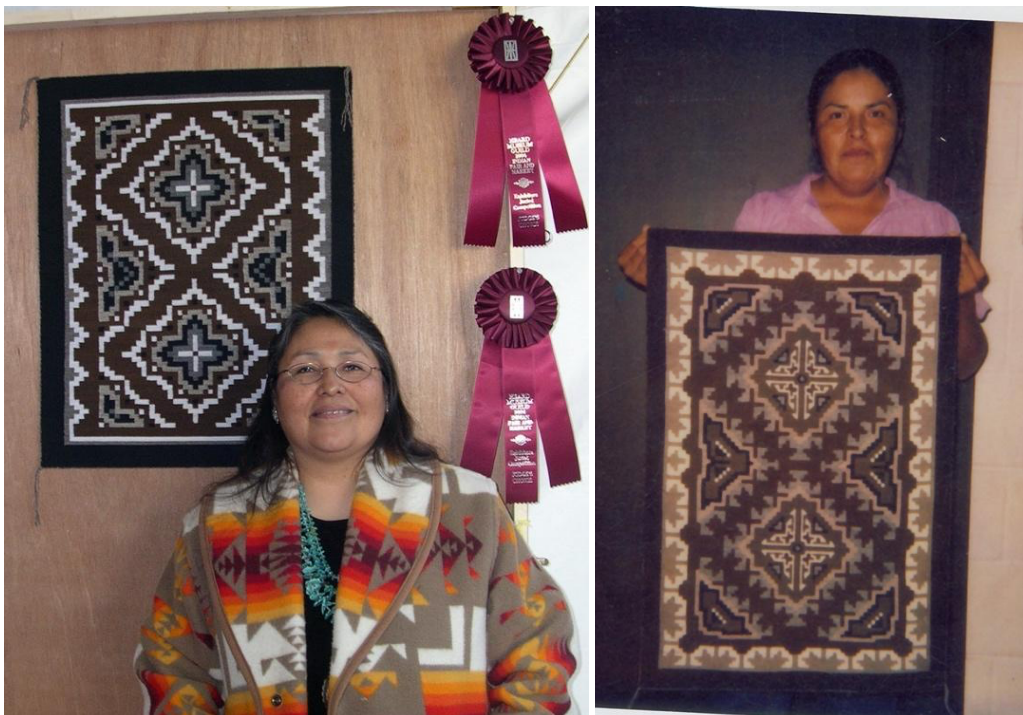


# Dah iist'ó bikéé' yisháát (My Journey with the Loom)

Lynda Teller Pete

Even before I worked the loom, the loom was working its magic on me.

I grew up watching my older sisters, Barbara and Rosann; my mother, Ruth; and my grandmother, Susie Tom, create masterpieces from the signature earth tones of the Two Grey Hills area of the Navajo Nation.



**Left:** Barbara Teller Ornelas with weaving and awards, Heard's Indian Fair and Market, Phoenix, 2005. Photo: Belvin Pete. **Right:** Rosann Teller Lee with weaving, Newcomb, New Mexico, ca. 1990s. Photo: Ruth Teller.

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**Left:** Ruth Shorty Begay Teller spinning yarn, Southwest Indian Fair, Arizona State Museum, 2005. Photo: Dr. Ann Hedlund. **Right:** Susie Tom with weaving, Newcomb, New Mexico, ca. 1980s. Photo: Ruth Teller.

In the steady beat of their weaving combs, I heard the songs, prayers, and stories of our people. In their efforts to sell and promote their work, I saw the ongoing cost of racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and cultural appropriation. The experiences of my father, Sam, managing the Two Grey Hills Trading Post further informed my understanding of the world and my place in it.

By the time I began to weave, weaving had already begun to shape me.



Lynda Teller Pete with weaving, Heard's Fair, Phoenix, 2005. Photo: Belvin Pete.

I am a fifth-generation Diné (Navajo) weaver born into the Tabaaha (Water Edge Clan) and born for the To'aheedliinii (Two Waters Flow Together Clan).<sup>1</sup> With the additions of my niece, nephew, and granddaughter, my family boasts seven generations of Diné weavers. It is a practice that's extraordinarily communal, yet also highly individual. When I touch a tapestry made by someone in my family, I can feel their hands strumming the warps and hear the beat of their weaving comb, and, without even looking, I know who made it. We weave something of ourselves into every piece.

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My official instruction began when I was six. At that age, it was easy to forget the daily lesson on treating our Navajo weaving tools with the utmost care and respect. When I returned to school in the fall, I would grumble to my friends, “I had to weave every day. I saw my cousins playing outside, and I could not go out to play with them.” It felt like I was weaving all the time. In retrospect, I was asked to weave a mere twenty minutes before being allowed to go outside to play, but twenty minutes can feel like forever to a kid.

I became curious about how my mother learned. I knew her family had struggled with poverty; her childhood seemed to hold a lot of unspoken sadness. She told me that she learned how to do basic weaving from her older sister, Marie, just as I was learning from my sisters. She recalled trips with her mother to visit other weavers in the 1930s, earning desperately needed money by finishing rugs for them.

My mother loved seeing the brightly dyed wool in people’s houses; she couldn’t wait to learn how to dye and weave with vivid reds, yellows, greens, and blues. But she learned that was not allowed by the non-Native traders at Newcomb and Two Grey Hills (New Mexico), who wanted weavers there to use only Two Grey Hills’ naturally blended tan, gray, white, and black. Traders would penalize weavers who didn’t do as they directed. Traders controlled both the pricing and promotion, which meant that they controlled the weaver’s ability to put food on the table. Instead of encouraging self-expression, they stifled it. They corralled creativity right

along with the sheep. My mother was eighty before she finally wove her first pictorial with brightly dyed commercial wool.

The 1940s found my mother married and living with my paternal grandparents in White Rock, New Mexico, near Burnham. Her mother-in-law, Nellie Peshlaki Teller, originally from the Two Grey Hills/Toadlena area, wove saddle blankets and other heavy rugs.

Susie and Nellie were both weavers, but they were on very different economic footing. Susie barely eked out a living between sales of her rugs, while Nellie had a large land base and livestock to sell, and her husband grafted fruit trees, broke horses, and worked seasonally at the local trading post. Nellie didn't have to sell her rugs; she made saddle blankets for family members and rugs for presents.

When my father returned from his army enlistment, my parents settled in Two Grey Hills, where my father got a job managing the famous trading post. My father worked with two of the owners from 1945 to 1980. My mother's weaving demonstrations began to draw a steady flow of tourists. People sometimes purchased her weavings right off the loom. My father was a strong advocate for her business.

During that time my mother also developed a keen interest in the work of other weavers. She kept boxes of old photos of tapestries and could tell me just by looking at it who the weaver was, and sometimes how much money they received. I

kept seeing certain designs over and over, and asked her why she used her mother's or her grandmother's design. She said, "I miss them, I miss their voices, I miss hearing the beating of their combs, I used their designs to feel their presence."

Slowly, I came to understand what she meant and to share her love for weaving. I once asked about the feather design in my mother's and grandmother's weavings. She told me that when she was little, they would go to a Medicine Man for healing ceremonies and her mother, Susie, saw him make a feather dance without the aid of his hands, strings, or any hidden devices. Susie said the medicine was very powerful, and she wove the feathers in her rugs to honor the Medicine Man and the healing she received.

Hearing these stories, it felt like I was picking through priceless gifts. Each was wrapped in love and placed with other age-old treasures. I know that we have plenty more treasure to add: my own, my sister Barbara's, my niece Sierra's, my nephew Michael's, and my granddaughter Roxanne's stories. I recently heard Roxanne say, "Every time we go to my Grandma Rose's house in Newcomb, I walk around, and I see all the things inside her house, all the things outside her house, her farmland, and I think about how all this came about with her weaving. Without the sale of her weavings, there would be no home, I would not have ties to my Grandma Rose."





**Left:** Sierra Teller Ornelas, Barbara Teller Ornelas, Lynda Teller Pete, and Michael Teller Ornelas (pictured from left to right) with weavings and an award, Santa Fe Indian Market, New Mexico, 2010. Photo: Belvin Pete. **Right:** Roxanne Rose Lee with weaving and award, Santa Fe Indian Market, New Mexico, 2015. Photo: Lynda Teller Pete.

Even when I have been away from the loom, I have been shaped by its absence. For a few years I took a government job, working for the Department of Labor. Our unit was focused on Native populations and housed at a regional Indigenous center, offering programs ranging from childcare to veterans' and senior services.

I learned a lot about people while working there. I saw the basic human needs that we all share, as well as the inequities many face. I was also exposed to bullying and a dictatorial management style. So in 2010, when I left that job and returned to my first love, weaving, I also looked at it as an opportunity to expand opportunities for others and to work by my own values.

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With the support of my husband, Belvin, I partnered with my sister Barbara Teller Ornelas to teach weaving to people of all ages. We've shown hundreds of new weavers how to carry on the tradition. We have a scholarship program for Diné students that prioritizes family duos – be they mother and daughter, siblings, or even cousins – so they can encourage each other during classes and for years to come. For us, weaving and family are inseparable.



Lynda Teller Pete (left) and Barbara Teller Ornelas (right) at Two Grey Hills Trading Post, Two Grey Hills, New Mexico, 2021. Photo: Belvin Pete.

We teach not only the technical aspects, but the integration of ancient knowledge, cultural protocols, and traditional pathways, adapting to the present without losing any of their core concept of hózhó. Hózhó expresses the Diné's understanding of harmony as it is reflected in their lives as weavers.

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Barbara and I have also written two books together: *Spider Woman's Children: Navajo Weavers Today* (2018) and *How to Weave a Navajo Rug and Other Lessons from Spider Woman* (2020). With Belvin's help and the cooperation of the Heard Museum in Phoenix, we've also begun capturing our lessons on video, making it possible to teach people anywhere in the world, or even in the next century.

We're educating non-weavers, too, about issues like racism and cultural appropriation. In 2020 I joined the board of the Textile Society of America to guide national systemic change, so the organization better reflects the people who pioneered and still practice the craft. I hope to channel my efforts to lead in order to increase both equity and awareness, and to give notice that we are the people best qualified to tell our histories and teach our arts.

The COVID-19 pandemic years from 2020 to the present have sharpened my focus. The disease has been devastating for my family, my culture, and my art. The Navajo Nation has lost a lot of our elders and traditional knowledge, placing even more barriers between our young Diné people and the teachings that define us.

My family and I share our calling with as many as we can, holding workshops, giving lectures, participating in exhibitions, being featured in many publications, and finally writing our own two Navajo weaving books. I will continue to seek out opportunities to network and collaborate with people all over the world, and establish organizations to advance our art and assist our students in weaving beautiful new stories.

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I am a teacher, lecturer, activist, and writer, yet at the core of it all, I am a Diné weaver. I still use designs from four and five generations past, even as I add my own ideas and variations. Weaving is my connection to the universe, holding my family's stories, songs, and prayers, along with my own.

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<sup>1</sup> When we introduce ourselves, we have to recite the first four clans. We honor both parents. We are born into my mother's clan, Tabaaha, and we are born for my father's clan, To'aheedliini. Then we recite our paternal grandfather's clan and that of our maternal grandfather, in that order. When addressing an audience of all Diné, we recite all eight maternal and paternal clans, cite where we were raised, and then formally end with: "This is how I am a Diné woman."