

**Eavesdrop on a Conversation with
Ricky Tims, creative quilter and musician
October 16, 2007**

Penny:

Greetings, quilters. Welcome to our October Eavesdrop on a Telephone Conversation. Whether you're a regular eavesdropper in our series or it's your first time joining us, you're in for a treat. Today, creative quilter and musician Ricky Tims is with me to explore how, we ordinary quilters, can create extraordinary quilts.

Ricky is known in the international world of quilting as an enthusiastic and encouraging teacher, an award winning quilter and talented and spellbinding speaker. His innovative and entertaining presentation features live music and humor combined with scholarly insights and wisdom.

His quilts have been displayed worldwide and are highly regarded as excellent examples of contemporary quilts with traditional appeal. Ricky is passionate about quilting and is delighted to share his experience and enthusiasm with quilters of every level of expertise.

He's challenged by creativity in all forms and encourages individuals to cultivate self-expression, reach for the unreachable and believe in the impossible. Ricky began designing and making quilts in 1991 after inheriting his grandmother's sewing machine and was recently selected as one of the 30 most distinguished quilters in the world.

He maintains an extensive international schedule of teaching and speaking engagements, hosts the week-long La Veta Quilting Retreat and presents the two-and-a-half day Ricky Tims Super Quilts Seminars in selected cities throughout the United States.

Ricky moved to La Veta, Colorado, a tiny mountain town in the valley of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, where he opened a fiber art gallery, Tim's Art Quilt Studio. It is here that he curates exhibits, holds week-long retreats for quilters and produces a small, summer concert series.

It must be in your gallery where you're showing your quilt show. Is that right?

Ricky: It's where we shoot it.

Penny: Ricky continues to be inspired by the beauty and spirit of the mountains and the community artists of La Veta. I saw Ricky at one of his Super Quilts Seminars and he is just fabulous. If you ever have a chance to see him in person, go out of your way to get there.

Ricky: Thank you, that's very kind of you to say.

Penny: Feel free to add anything you would like to that introduction and please tell us how your granny's sewing machine got you started quilting. Also, I love to hear the story about the quilt that you and your dad made.

Ricky: My granny had a son and in 1955 he was 16 years old and killed in a car accident. It was the same year she bought that Sears and Roebuck Kenmore sewing machine.

I often teased that it was very fancy because it had zigzag and reverse. She never said, "I bought this machine to help me through my time of grief" for having lost her son but I do know that's when it was purchased.

All of that was happening about the same time. Knowing how handwork and staying busy can keep someone sane in a time of grief, I think there's a correlation between that sewing machine and the loss of her son.

I was born in 1956 and I could not replace her son. I do think that we were very closely bonded because I filled a void in her life. That sewing, the loss of her son and then my subsequent birth were all tied into a little package within a few short months of each other.

As time goes on, granny becomes a widow and then in 1991 when she was 83 years old, she got remarried. It's when she got remarried that we had to sell her house and get rid of her belongings because she moved to live with this fellow and they didn't have room for her stuff.

It was then my mom asked what I wanted of my granny's and I mentally surveyed her house. All I wanted were a few knickknacks that meant a lot to me when I was a child, a little figurine and a little gong that she had in her kitchen window. Mother asked if I wanted her sewing machine and my initial answer was, "Not really," because I don't sew.

As I thought about it, I didn't want it to end up in a yard sale either because it did dawn on me that it was really important to her. I had a lot of memories sitting on the floor beside her watching her wind the bobbins. Sometimes I pressed the foot pedal to make it go. Those memories were so strong that I didn't want to lose that sewing machine from the family.

It moved to St. Louis to be with me where I was living at the time. The sewing machine was really a piece of furniture. It was in a cabinet that folded up very nicely and I put a lamp on it. Then it began lurking in a corner. I began to futz with it.

I decided I could fiddle with that machine a bit and thought I could make a shirt. I did go to the Cloth World store looking for patterns. I was thinking, "This is really stupid because if I make it, I'll wear it. If I wear it, people will stare at me. What could I do that nobody would see?"

I turned around and there was a rack of maybe six or eight quilt books. One of them was a sampler. I bought that book and a little bit of fabric. It

was a book that had no rotary cutter instructions. It was all templates, scissors, quarter-inch seams and very old-fashioned hand appliqué. Nonetheless, that's what got me started.

You asked about the quilt that my dad and I made together. The interesting part of this is the week that I started making that quilt, I was making each block in the book as they came, just one page at a time.

Then lo and behold I ended up calling home that weekend and asked my dad what he was doing since he had just retired. He said, "Oh, I'm making a quilt." I said, "You're what?" He said, "I'm making a quilt!" I was stunned by this because I called home to tell everybody I was making a quilt.

It was very odd that my dad started making a quilt the same week I did. I was making Shoe Fly Nine Patch blocks and also Card Trick and Ohio Star, which weren't very difficult. I asked my dad what he was making and he said, "I'm making one they call a Broken Star." This one is made out of thousands of diamonds.

It's not your beginning quilt, but he had thought his mother had made one when she was 85 so certainly he could make one when he was 65. My dad made this king-size, Broken Star quilt. I always laugh and tell people that we call it a family treasure. I laugh and say, "It has the most beautiful, polyester, cotton-blend fabrics you've ever seen in your life."

Penny: I bet he cut every one of those with scissors.

Ricky: He did every stitch of that quilt all by himself. I should actually say my mom helped with the quilting because she likes to do a little bit of needlework but she didn't do any of the patchwork.

Dad continues to quilt. As a matter of fact, this summer he made five king-size quilts. He continues to quilt like a fool. He doesn't want to make anything small. If they're not 90 inches, he's not interested in making it.

He sews all day and he's to the point now where he doesn't use anything but my hand-dyed fabrics. He will not go to the store and buy fabrics so I sent him all of our odd-sized pieces for him to use for his quilts.

The reason I told the story of that first Broken Star is because after about 15 years of quilting he decided he wanted to make a Lone Star, which is just the center part of the Broken Star. I think he did that because he wanted to redeem himself from all the pitfalls and mistakes he had made back in the beginning.

I was watching him and he was actually taking my hand-dyed fabrics and fussy cutting every diamond. I said, "Dad, this is not necessary. There is a faster way to do this and I will dye for you the colors that you need. Just give me a few hours and we'll get this fabric all ready."

I dyed the fabric and we got it nicely starched. He began cutting and sewing that star together and it's just absolutely beautiful. I knew it was going to be beautiful so I did a setting for it that had some curved arches and beautiful appliqué.

My dad pieced the star, I did the setting, appliqué and quilted it. It has won prizes everywhere it's gone, including best of shows and awards of merit. It won third at Houston and second in Paducah. I don't know this for sure but I like to tease and say it's the first father/son quilt to ever win an international quilt competition.

My dad is 81. He's not a spring chicken anymore. He's got great grandkids and he made all the great grandkids a baby quilt. I think his mission right now is to make sure that they all have an adult quilt so when they're fully grown they can remember their great grandfather's quilt. I think this is an amazing thing.

Penny:

That's neat.

Ricky, how did you move from making that traditional quilt into the beautiful contemporary quilts that you make now?

Ricky:

While I was making those traditional blocks for that first quilt, I had started sneaking into the grocery store to the magazine rack. I started buying a few quilt magazines. I was very much enlightened by what quilting was doing in 1991 in becoming very contemporary and artistic.

I had always been in music so art and music has been a part of my life. I wasn't a painter or a drawer but I did study and like art. What happened is by looking at those images I was inspired. Then, by reading those magazines I learned there was something called a rotary cutter because I didn't even know about that.

I bought my mat, rotary cutter and ruler and was amazed the first time I used it. I wanted to do a landscape with rolling hills and cut flowing curves. I couldn't cut flowing curves with scissors, but with the rotary cutter it just seemed logical.

I put these landscaped-typed quilts together that were not fancy by any standards. I didn't use a quarter-inch seam and was breaking every rule but didn't know I was breaking them. If something wasn't quite flat, I'd really press it until it was flat.

I tell people one of the most beautiful things ever is ignorance. If you're ignorant you're not going to beat yourself up if you didn't do something right. I could do anything and wasn't afraid to try anything because I was basically ignorant of the rules.

If you look at my work on my website, I have an older and newer gallery of quilts. If you look at those old quilts within the first year, you'll see some very contemporary artistic quilts that just happened because it was in me to happen.

Penny: How do you choose the fabrics, colors and themes for your quilts?

Ricky: I work very intuitively. I like color so I'm not afraid of it. I've really thought about this lately on the rhapsody quilts in the new book coming out with CNT and the quilt that I'm working on today.

I just started with a piece of fabric that I like and then cut out another piece that I thought would go with it. I look at my fabric stash and think, "That will look good," and I keep adding with contrast and value more than color.

The reason I say that is because, especially as a quilter, I think you make stew with the ingredients of color. If you make a stew one night and you've got certain ingredients in the refrigerator, you're going to have a stew that tastes pretty good. The next time you make a stew you may use some of the same things, but might throw in something different. It's still going to be pretty good.

It all gets blended and splattered around. On the quilt, establish your color palette that you think looks good together, whether they're the tonal values that look good or the variety of colors. If you then stick with that genre of color and don't suddenly pull in something new, then they will stir together the way a good stew stirs together. They will blend on the surface of the quilt.

Honestly, I understand and teach color theory, but I do not think about color theory much when I'm working. Ultimately, I try to teach that your intuition will guide you. I really do believe that. I believe whenever somebody says, "I don't know if I like that," then don't use it. It's not necessarily the color they don't like. They're just looking into how it fits into the bigger scheme of things.

Penny: It's interesting because last month we had Joen Wolfram on our call. I know Joen is a friend of yours and she has the same attitude toward color. Her latest book is about taking photographs and using the colors that are in those.

Ricky: She's got great books on color. I have learned from them. One of my first quilt books was from Joen Wolfram, *The Magical Effects of Color*. Jenny Beyer had a quilt color book back in 1991 or 1992 called *Color Confidence*. Those books certainly influenced me.

When I teach color, the number one thing I want students to know is the value. I want them to understand value is all relative. You can look at the big picture and say, "This is medium, this is light and this is dark," but in your quilt that medium may be the darkest fabric you have or it may be the lightest fabric you have.

It all ends up relating. If you can get the value of the quilt working right, the colors come. It's the value that makes the design pop. That's why I go for value much more. A large scale print that has lights, mediums and darks on a black background with floral or all kinds of crazy things on it can be a beautiful fabric but gets muddled inside of quilt if you're trying to show the actual design.

Different fabrics work in different ways but you've got to keep it in the values family more than the color family.

Penny: Do you have favorite colors or color combinations that you like for your quilts?

Ricky: I'm like most people. I fluctuate from season to season. Like the way we used to love avocado green and burnt orange carpet but not anymore. We do find combinations that suit us for awhile. I'll tell you right now, purple and orange with some hot pink thrown in, I'm all over it! My new

lines of fabric have a lot of purples and oranges that work in that color combination.

I think we all gravitate to certain colors. I'm probably known for brighter colors. Yet when I look at some of the new fabrics I've got coming out, there's a dustiness and toned down quality to them. It's like I'm settling down a little bit. I don't have to splash it in your face quite so much.

Penny: Do you think that's just what's coming out and you're not just toning it down because you think maybe more people would be inclined to buy this than they would some of the brighter colors?

Ricky: Honestly, I don't think like that. There are a lot of people that like bright colors and a lot that like toned colors. I try to keep a variety out there. Today, I'm working on something that's colorful but still toned.

Penny: Your rhapsody quilts are beautiful and look very complicated, yet you say they're easy to make. Can you share with us the process for making the quilt and how you developed it?

Ricky: Before I forget, I'll tell you about my new book called *Rhapsody Quilts*. It is a fat book full of information on how to design and piece it together. Everything I've done in my quilting experience, every class that I've taught, the two books I've got, all have been serendipitous, unexpected surprises. I have never set out to create something new.

When something happens and I can identify it as a formula, I can then teach it so others can figure out how to do it. That's when it finds itself into a book or a pattern.

With Rhapsody, it's so hard to describe. I need a million visual images for this one. All I wanted to do was practice my machine appliqué.

I did a 16 or 18 inch block similar to a Hawaiian-cut appliqué. It was one piece on top of a background piece, but it was a snowflake or something with spikes coming off. It was very symmetrical and repetitive.

When I stitched it, I was really happy with it. I thought, "I don't want to leave it that way. Let me add a border on it." I wanted something flowing and curvy, so I created a flowing, curvy and repetitive border. Then it kept growing and growing.

I looked at it and realized what I had created was a quilt centered on a vertical and horizontal axis. Essentially, if you look at a Rhapsody quilt, you can look at it as if it were a big four patch. It's not a four patch, but what's in the upper left is mirrored on the upper right. What's at the top is mirrored down to the bottom.

There is a lot of formality to this quilt. I teach this by using eight-and-a-half inch printer paper folded it up into a little triangle so that there's only one-eighth of that paper left.

We draw something in the way of lines to create what I call a "skeleton." That skeleton is only seam lines in the quilt. Once we open that paper, we'll transfer it to the quarter.

We'll transfer the quarter in a mirror image to the half and transfer the top half to the bottom half, creating this skeleton, which is the seam lines of the various fabrics.

The Rhapsody quilt is made up of units that I could call blocks, but they are not square blocks. They could be football-shaped, where they're pointy on each end.

They could be big, chunky 12-inch diamonds, except instead of having a straight edge for the diamond, it might swoop in to make a taper on that. These odd shapes become the background on which the appliqué is put.

With every student I teach, it is always the same every time I make one of these. I get my design enlarged. I start putting my background pieces up, look at it and fuss with it. I think, "I'm not sure about this or that." Everybody is the same way. I say, "Stop overdoing it. The spectacular aspect of this quilt will be the appliqué."

All you're trying to put up is the lights, mediums and darks to have a color combination you like to start making your stew. When you start encrusting it with all this special appliqué, the whole look totally changes.

I think of these Rhapsody quilts now because people are making them, and we're starting to see them. They're very identifiable even if no two are alike, just like a Baltimore Album quilt. You look at it and say, "Hey, that's a Baltimore Album quilt," or an Album quilt, so to speak. Yet everybody might make theirs a little bit differently, using different colors or putting different mementos in them.

These Rhapsody quilts will become very identifiable when people understand what they are. They will look and say, "There's a Rhapsody quilt," because of the reversed and mirrored arrangement of everything and because of the curves featured in the quilt.

I didn't expect that to happen. It just happens. There's very little piecing in them because the chunks are huge. Most of the work is with the appliqué. They're not nearly as complicated as they look.

I take pride in the fact that almost everything I teach is a lot simpler than it looks. I tell people that I don't make complicated quilts, but I do strive to make easy quilts that look complicated.

They may look more dazzling and pizzazy when you look at the finished thing, but when you break it down into its simplest parts, it's really not complicated at all.

Penny: We'll have to try that one.

Most of the people here are beginning quilters who make traditional patchwork blocks. How can we make the transition from those traditional blocks to your quilts, which are very contemporary by comparison?

Ricky: You have to be willing to try. Also, nobody should ever feel like they should move from one genre to another if they're comfortable where they are and are doing what they like. The only reason to make that transition is if they have an inspiration to do it.

As far as the direction they would go, that's a hard question to answer. Technique is one thing. People get ideas in their head. They have a quilt they want to make but just don't know how to get there.

If you only know how to sew squares together or maybe how to sew half-square triangles together, then you're limited to two things for every quilt you'll make. If you then learn how to appliqué, you can at least add some appliqué on top of those squares or half-square triangles.

My point is, the more techniques you learn and the more you learn how to put different things together, then whenever you have a vision in your head, at least you have the skill ability to make that happen.

This is a blessing for me. You've been to my seminar. I'm teaching techniques. I'm not teaching them how to draw something. I'm giving them some principles on how to make it into patchwork.

By doing these principles and giving them the techniques, I've had many students from a seminar come up to say, "Thank you. I've had an idea rolling around in my head for five years or more. Now I know I can go home, draw it and do it. Now I know how to make it happen." In the end, it's about learning the techniques you'll need to make this happen.

To learn the design skills, you just have to draw. People say, "I don't know how to draw." I don't either. People laugh and scoff when I say that.

If you sat me down and said, "Ricky, let's draw a picture of a little boy walking a dog," it would look worse than a first grader's drawing. I might fuss with it for a day or two and make it look okay. But I do understand flowing lines, curves and simple abstracts.

When I teach my Rhapsody design class, everybody in that class designs their appliqué with two exercises. The first one is looking at something like a fleur-de-lis and drawing it. Not tracing it, but drawing it and adapting it to the shape they're trying to fit it in. They fuss with that for 20 or 30 minutes and have it perfect.

The next exercise is to give them an odd shape. Within that shape, they create an appliqué from nothing. They do an exercise drawing it from something. Then they completely erase the palette and start again by drawing from nothing.

I have never, ever had a student who could not create a design that would be worthy of putting on a quilt. It's as unique as their handwriting. That's what I love, seeing this individuality coming out of them.

Penny: Have you seen some of them turn into quilts?

Ricky: Absolutely. In the new Rhapsody book, the entire back chapter is a gallery of quilts made by students who have done all of their own original designs. It's very exciting.

Penny: Where would you recommend a first-time quilter begin, with a traditional quilt or something more contemporary?

Ricky:

They need to start with something that's doable and manageable for their skill level. Hopefully they're going to classes or shops that will understand where they are with that skill level.

I don't recommend that everybody do what my dad did and start with the broken star with diamonds out the wazoo. It would be nice to have that goal, but it can be a disheartening thing to start a project and spend days, weeks or months on it only to find out it's just not going to come together because you haven't figured it out yet.

Also, different people progress differently. Some people will take to quilting like a duck to water, like I did. Other people will need to practice their sewing skills.

As a beginner, I remember it was difficult to keep the top and bottom edges aligned as I was sewing. My lower fabric kept slipping under the top fabric. I would turn it over and wasn't even sewing on the bottom fabric.

It's those simple little skills that need to be learned. As a matter of fact, I went back to sampler. That was the best thing I could have possibly done for myself.

By doing a sampler, where every block was different and where I learned new techniques, I was able to find out what I liked and what I didn't like.

I got to learn how to get more and more pieces in a block, deal with more difficult construction and put in a y-seam like a miter. All of that came eventually from that first quilt. Then you just start honing those skills from there.

I do not think that any beginner should have to make a traditional sampler quilt. I don't want that to come out either. If their desire is to make artistic things that are more original, then they should just say, "I need to learn

how to appliqué," or, "I need to learn how to piece this. How can I learn about constructing this?"

Hopefully they can find a teacher who can give them some guidance and also make it fairly simple for them at the beginning.

Penny: Are you quilts machine quilted or hand quilted?

Ricky: My early quilts were hand quilted. All of my quilts since 1995 have been machine quilted.

Penny: Do you quilt some yourself?

Ricky: I do quilt them myself. I stitch from beginning to end, binding, sleeve and label on the back.

I also design quilts. If I design a quilt and the design is to be produced in a pattern, I might design the quilt, write up the pattern and have four or five people help me piece the quilt top. Then I might send that off to somebody else to get it quilted, because that is the design I've created.

What I call "my quilts," I do from start to finish all by myself. The machine-quilting aspect is probably the thing I enjoy most about the whole process. I absolutely love it.

Penny: How long did it take you to get really good at machine quilting?

Ricky: You don't want the answer, do you really?

Penny: I don't know. Is it five minutes?

Ricky: My first large machine-quilted quilt won best machine quilting at NQA. It was selected as the 101st best quilt of the 20th century. I missed that little notch by one.

Seriously, it was like a duck taking to water. I had done some smaller quilts, but my first large machine quilt did very well for me.

I'm a pianist. I've played piano since I was three. I have hand-eye coordination that is well-developed. For me, driving that quilt under that needle was not complicated. It just made sense in my brain. There's a correlation to the hand-eye coordination I have from playing piano. I don't know that, but that's my supposition.

Penny: How do you decide what the quilting design will be? Do you plan that out ahead of time?

Ricky: That's the biggest fear with every single quilt I make. Now I feel confident.

I think of my Rhapsody quilts as a little bit more formal. They're a contemporary traditional quilt. I don't consider them in the art genre, even though they are art pieces. They are a contemporary version of traditional quilts.

I do like traditional designs, like quilted feathers and those kinds of things. I try to leave open spaces just to show off the quilting. If it is an art quilt I'm doing, many times I just want to add a texture.

I will do an overall pattern. It could be crisscrossed lines, loop-de-dos or whatever, but I tend to not vary from that design, because I want the whole quilt to have a texture on top of it.

The fabric and the design are more important than any of the quilting design I'm putting on it. I'm just enhancing it with the quilting.

In the end, you have to practice. You have to look and study. My recommendation to students who don't know what to do on their quilts is, number one, don't wait until the quilt top is done before you think about it.

Start thinking about it when you start piecing it. You'll have a week, three weeks or three months to think about what you're going to do. Do samples from time to time just to see how your skills are, but also what kinds of designs tend to work for you.

Finally, the thing that helped me more than anything was when I stopped going to quilt shows and just looked at the quilts themselves as a blanked statement.

I started digging into what that person did that really attracted me to that quilt. I would study how they quilted those quilts. Sometimes I would find quilting and say, "I don't know that I really like that there." I would just make a mental note that I don't want to do that kind of quilting on that kind of area.

I would find other quilts and say, "Wow, that quilting looks great on that quilt." How did they do it and what did it look like? You can't study that in a book, because you can't get that detail.

When you go to those quilt shows, you can get your nose on those quilts and really study what they did to actually quilt the quilt.

Penny: Do you remember or do you take pictures?

Ricky: I remember. It doesn't hurt to have a notepad, but I'm not that organized.

Penny: You look organized.

Ricky: It's all smoke and mirrors, sweetheart.

Penny: Good smoke.

Do you mark your quilts for machine quilting or do you just have that in your mind?

Ricky: Yes and no. I never always do anything and I never, never do anything, which is an oxymoron in itself. I do what is required or necessary for each individual project.

I love to do improvisational quilting, even if it's feathers. I've done several quilts where I will do little feather plumes randomly over a border, just letting them do their own thing. This border doesn't look like that border and this plume will run into that plume.

It doesn't matter because I can draw them. I tell people, if you can draw them, you can learn to quilt them. If you're trying to quilt them without learning to draw them, you don't know where you're driving.

You have to know where you're going to drive. By practicing on paper, I'm able to know what I'm doing. Then I start doing it on a quilt.

Penny: It goes back to that hand-eye coordination.

Ricky: Absolutely. This is a hard one to describe, but it is on my "Grand Finale Machine Quilting" DVD on my website. When I need to have a perfect mirror image on an L-shaped border and really want that to be symmetrical, I use a polyester tear-away stabilizer.

My brand is called Ricky Tims Stable Stuff. It comes on a roll and also comes in 8.5 x 11 sheets. The reason I have it in sheets now is because I used to take a different product and cut it into 8.5 x 11 sheets. I've eliminated that cutting part.

I will usually draw my design on freezer paper templates for large sections. Then I will copy that design as many times as I need it onto this tear-away stabilizer. Then I put that on the back of my quilt top.

That's important. It's not on the quilt top. Most people mark their quilt top right on the surface of the quilt top. I put this on the back of the quilt top. Then I use water soluble thread, top and bobbin. I free-motion stitch on top of that copied design.

That design is very faint. I don't need a big, black design. I just need to be able to see it, so I usually set my copy machine on a faint, light setting.

Then I just stitch on it. It allows me to practice my quilting design before I'm really quilting it. The bobbin is marking my quilt top. That bobbin water soluble thread can be seen on any fabric, including navy, black, prints or whatever you want to do.

I practiced my design and didn't trace it. I tell people, "You don't need to learn how to trace. Tracing is not a skill you need to improve." Most people are looking to improve their quilting skill.

Mark your quilt by quilting it. Then you've already practiced the whole quilt. It didn't take you any longer to do it that way than it would have to trace it all.

Now when you put your sandwich together, you follow those water-soluble thread lines. Then you dunk the quilt in water when it's done. Those threads go away, and it's quilted. That's how I mark it now. If I have to mark, I use this Ricky Tims Stable Stuff product.

Penny: That's brilliant.

Ricky: It doesn't dissolve. The product is made out of polyester. The substance that makes it feel like paper is what dissolves. When the quilt gets wet and the water soluble thread goes away, this Stable Stuff product turns into a spider web of dusty polyester filling inside the quilt.

You'll never know it's there, because it's way thinner than your batting. You haven't even added trapunto or extra batting. It's just inside your quilt and totally soft.

Penny: Interesting. What kind of batting do you use?

Ricky: It depends on the quilt. For most of my traditionally styled quilts, I use Hobbs 80/20 Heirloom blend. For most of my art quilts, I'll use Warm and Natural from the Warm Company. I've used those battings for so long and keep buying them on the bolts, so when I run out, I just buy more of the same.

Over the last 10 years, batting companies have done a phenomenal job of creating batting. If you're a Cotton Classic person, you like Soft and White or Matilda's Wool. All of those are good battings, and I wouldn't deny that to anybody.

Here are my criteria for batting. I want it to be mostly cotton. The 80/20 is 80% cotton. The Warm and Natural is 100% cotton. I want it to be thin.

The thinness is what allows me to get that quilt in my sewing machine without fighting it. The cotton is what allows the back and the top to stick together so there's not a polyester slide going on in the middle. At any rate, I'm basting it really well.

I do quilt on a regular domestic sewing machine. It's what I do nine-tenths of all my quilts on. I do have an APQS George machine. I have recently done a couple of quilts on that, because there's more space.

Realistically, I teach people how to quilt on a regular domestic sewing machine. I don't want them to feel that, if they don't have a huge, long arm or a George machine, they can't do it. That thin batting allows them to get that quilt manipulated in that machine.

Penny: You mentioned basting. How do you baste your quilts?

Ricky: I baste with water-soluble thread.

Penny: Even the quilts you'll machine quilt? You still baste with thread?

Ricky: I do, but I baste them with water-soluble thread. When I wet my quilts to get rid of all that water-soluble thread, I don't have to pick out any basting.

I don't have to worry about breaking any threads. I don't have to worry about missing a thread if I'm at a quilt show and saying, "Oh, my gosh. There's a basting thread still hanging on my quilt." It dissolves and goes away.

I am starting to use KK 2000 and 505 spray bastings more often. I don't use that as my exclusive basting, unless it's a small quilt. If it's a big quilt, 90-inch square, I probably will still do some thread basting, but there might be a little bit of spray in there as well just to keep things stuck and snug, so I don't get puckers.

Penny: When did you begin dyeing your own fabric?

Ricky: In 1996, I did a couple of batches of hobby dyeing. That's what I call it whenever you get together with a couple of friends and spend four or five hours dyeing fabric. Those pieces are the ones you love and cherish.

Penny: You never want to use them in a quilt.

Ricky: You don't want to use them. You want to touch them and show them off, but you don't want to use them in a quilt.

Then I just started getting crazy. I thought, "Let me just pour some dye on it." I started doing these multi-colored fabrics and really liked the results.

But I really didn't want to use them in a quilt, because they were really beautiful on their own.

Again, that relates to convergence quilts. I thought, "Let me try something." I started experimenting with these fabrics. Lo and behold, with this process of the convergence quilts, which is slicing, dicing and moving around, I was able to preserve the integrity of this beautiful multi-colored fabric, rather than using it to cut an appliqué rose petal out.

Then I have a beautiful rose petal, but now I have a hole in the middle of this beautiful fabric. It was a great way to utilize the fabric to its fullest potential.

Penny: That's the kind of fabric you made for your dad when he wanted to make that kind of quilt.

Ricky: When my dad made his Lone Star, I made textured solids. With a Lone Star, each diamond row circulates out in a different color. I dyed a blue, magenta, dusty green and bright gold. Those were sliced using a strip-piecing method to get that quilt together.

On the quilts he's doing now, he's taking my multi-colored and these quilts are so loud. They're wonderful.

Penny: What kinds of dyes do you use?

Ricky: Procion dyes and MX fiber reactive dyes. Those are easily available to all quilters at Prochem Chemical Company and Dharma Trading Company. Those are easily found online. Both of those companies will give you free instructions, because they want to sell dye.

Penny: I've used those dyes for years. They're great. They're very solid.

Ricky: They're colorfast. That's the thing. Your store-bought fabrics will often fade. I haven't had any fading on any of my quilts with the Procion dyes. I don't leave them in the sunshine all day either.

Penny: That makes a difference.

You talked a little bit about your new line of fabrics coming out. Can you tell us a little bit about them?

Ricky: A new line of fabrics came out in the spring. They're called Rhapsody Colorée. This all relates to this Rhapsody thing I have going on. The first line had some stripes, some rock walls and some very breezy and textured fabrics.

This new line being introduced at market in a couple of weeks is my textured solids. If people want to know what they look like, I would encourage them to go on my website. Go to the store where it says "Rhapsody hand dyes."

They're hand-dyed fabrics, which are expensive because they're dyed one yard at a time. They're not dyed on some assembly line. These Rhapsody Colorée solids coming out this fall emulate those for the price of regular fabric on the bolt.

I have fun designing fabric. I'm with Red Rooster. With the fabrics that are already in the stores, there's a very organic stripe. People have asked, "How did you get that to do that?" I say, "It's all photography."

I took a picture of a canna leaf. Cannas have those really big leaves with the blossom that comes up. They're about six feet tall. I found a leaf in Vancouver, British Columbia that was this beautiful pink and green variegated leaf. I took a great close-up of it. I took that variegation into Photoshop and stretched it like crazy to create the stripe that's on that fabric.

Another design is called Breeze, but it's very sky-like. I actually took a picture on wet asphalt of an oil slick or some gasoline that had dripped out of a car or a bus. I loved the colors, as the iridescence was there. Then I took that photograph and stretched it like crazy to get this incredible design.

I love working with photography to create designs as well. We'll continue doing a lot of fabric, maybe every six months. I might have to put the reins on it and say once a year, because it is a lot of work to create the fabrics and designs. I'm having a blast with the fabrics.

Penny: Let's switch gears and talk about your Super Quilt Seminar. Can you tell us who's involved and how you teach quilting techniques without having quilters sit at machines and sew fabrics? That was a really novel concept to me.

Ricky: My guest artists, or teachers, are Alex Anderson and Libby Lehman. We usually have a special appearance by Bob Purcell, who is with Superior Threads, because he knows everything about threads and tells it like it is. Most people don't know anything about what he's really, truly teaching about threads. His little bit is wonderful.

Traveling as a regular quilting teacher for several years, I would go someplace like Raleigh, North Carolina. It was on my calendar for two years. There were 20 people in the class, and it was totally filled.

At the meeting the night before, there are 30 people coming up saying, "I couldn't get in your class." I asked and they said, "That's right. We had 30 people on the waiting list."

I thought, "These 30 people waited two years for me to come all the way to Raleigh, North Carolina. They might as well not have waited at all, because they're not getting the advantage of anything."

Then in that six-hour class, I'm teaching one subject, like Convergence quilts. I didn't choose that. That's what the workshop chairperson told me to teach. That's on my menu, so that's what I'm teaching.

In that class, somebody was asking questions like, "How do you do that Caveman thing? How do you do that improvizationally? How do you do your machine binding? How do you dye fabrics?"

They would go on and on with these other questions. You can't teach them everything in one day, especially if you're going to stay on the subject.

Then I was watching our demographic of quilters schlepping these machines to class. They get to class and are stressed because they don't think they have the right fabrics for the class.

The irons are blowing circuits, and you're trying to find the church custodian to get the electricity turned back on. Everybody is not sewing during that time. There's not enough elbow space between you and the next person to lay out your work.

I could go on and on with why that's not the best way to have a sewing class, especially in one day with a national teacher who has come clear across the country.

I started thinking, "I have the ability to do all kinds of visual things technologically. I can do lights and camera. I can do produced DVDs. I can do PowerPoint presentations. Everybody is willing to sit and listen. I can teach them a lot more in that one day than one class, if they just did not cut and sew fabric."

I developed the idea of the Super Seminar. It was going to be two days long. I would teach 12 classes in two days. Of course, the biggest fear is

if I can pull it off. Can people sit there for twelve hours and not go bonkers?

It's like, once the pastor has gone over 20 minutes in a sermon, it's time to cut it. Each of my sessions is an hour and a half. The way it's presented, there's an entertaining value and an educational value. It's all shaken up and mixed up.

When an hour and a half is over, people say, "What do you mean it's over? It's time for a break already?"

That began working for me, to give a syllabus and share everything I know. I believe quilters can take the information, their syllabus, and go home in their own environment to create exactly what we did.

It has happened. I've gotten numerous photographs from people who have made their quilts based on what we taught in the seminar, and they never touched a machine for those two days.

Now it's two and a half days. That's primarily because I wanted to bring in a couple of other teachers, Alex and Libby, who brought something different to the table.

When we do the seminars, this is a venture my company does. We rent these performing arts halls. They're very expensive to rent for three days. We would have to rent the first day just for set up, even though we weren't there all day.

It made sense to start setting up in the morning then get started in the early evening of that first day. That's why we extended it to 15 hours. We'll be there renting the hall for that day anyway.

It's been great. I've enjoyed it. There is nothing else like it in the quilt world. It's very entertaining and educational. I desire to put that whole life-

focus aspect in it, so people get a lot of self-inspiration and renewed confidence just from some of the positive things I try to say during the course of the weekend.

Penny: Your personality comes across in spades. It's amazing the connection the audience feels to you even though there were 200 or 300 people sitting in chairs and you were up on the stage. There's just that aura in the room.

Ricky: That was a worry for me at first. I thought, "Will I lose the connection I have to the people? Will they feel like I'm just somebody up there on the stage being all pomp and circumstance?"

I want everybody to feel like I'm talking to them personally. I don't stop the whole day. I'm teaching the whole time. In the breaks, I'm talking to people and doing photographs and autographs because I want to be accessible. I want people to be able to come up, talk to me and feel like they've been able to have an interaction with me, if they so desire.

Penny: That was amazing too. Most teachers will say, "I need my break during the break. I'll see you later. Good luck." I can attest to that. You were at the table, walking around and signing.

Ricky: At the end of this thing, when we shut it all down and pack up to go home, I'm pretty tired. I give it my best shot for the three days.

Penny: How do you decide where they'll be?

Ricky: We get invitations from people who would like us to come to their area. It usually takes two and a half or three years to get there.

We don't go anywhere we're not invited. We don't call up somebody and say, "We want to come to your area." We want to already be wanted. We need to be wanted.

If there's no interest in us, the whole promotional side of it will flop. We go where we're wanted. We also need to go to metropolitan areas, because they have the kind of facility we need to do this.

We are looking into 800,000 or 900,000 attendees for these seminars. They are growing. We're already up into the 600,000 range.

As a matter of fact, the Livermore seminar that's happening at the end of January is already sold out. It's the first sold out one we've ever had. They are getting more popular.

First of all, people know me for *Convergence*, because that's the only book I've had. If they don't know me, they don't know how diverse my techniques are.

What I'm teaching is good for beginners, advanced, traditional quilters and art quilters. It hits all of the bases. Once they start realizing there's something for them, then they realize they want to go. That's why we're seeing the increased growth.

We have to look at the big picture. We can only do about four a year, because it's an administrative nightmare to put together. We have to go where we know we'll get the crowds and where the hosting group will make the best publicity push for us. That's really how it happens.

They don't have any expense. It doesn't cost the guild that's bringing us anything. We don't go to a guild. A guild hosts it. We go to a region and all the guilds and shops from a 300 to 500 mile area are who we try to target to. The hosting guild is the one we really have to depend on for some of the legwork and volunteers for the event.

Penny:

Let's talk about the quilt show online. How did it get started? Who is involved? How can we find it?

Ricky:

You can find it at www.TheQuiltShow.com. We spent weeks and weeks trying to come up with the cleverest name for a quilt show. We said, "Well, it's a quilt show. Let's just call it The Quilt Show." Nobody had it, so we used The Quilt Show as our name, and it's also the web address.

Interestingly enough, that started as a result of our marketing director thinking, "How can I expand my business? How can we make a better impact of what I have to share globally?" The seminar allows me to teach more people and nobody has to be left out, except in Livermore where we've sold out already.

This person said, "We need to get you on television. This is what you need to do." I said, "Yeah, right. Whatever." Nonetheless, we were convinced that maybe we should try a pilot. We presented this idea of the pilot to Bernina of America. The president said, "Yes, we'll fund your pilot."

That same week, I got news that Alex's "Simply Quilts" had been cancelled. I thought immediately, "I don't mind doing this, but I would really love to see Alex not leave the public eye like that. I would have a lot more fun if this was a two-person show."

I approached Alex. It was a few months later when we started talking about this. She said, "I don't know, Ricky. I don't think there will be a network to take it. What network are you looking at?" I said, "I don't know."

We started realizing that, if we did go to a network, we would probably be on a channel in the 900s, way back there on the extended, expanded cable.

People have to pay a fortune to be back there. It would be on at 3:00 in the morning, so there would be no opportunity for anybody to see it, unless they TiVo'd it or recorded it.

It was Alex's husband who said, "Why don't you consider the internet? There's so much video on the internet." We really started weighing the pros and cons.

One of the things about "Simply Quilts" that I freely tell people is that it was a great show. It ran 11 years. It was a spectacular thing for quilters and did a lot for the quilting industry.

But Alex did have restrictions. There were things she could not say and things she had to say. There were certain guests who might not get on because they had a certain slant to their work. It was limited. There were tough subjects, like the 9/11 quilts, that they weren't interested in promoting because it was too sensitive.

We feel that that's what the heart of quilters is. They do reach out and help people. By using the internet, we do not have these restrictions. We can say anything. We can say product names. I don't have any problem saying I'm using a particular thread so people can go out to buy that very thread.

The big challenge was to build a website. We represented the idea to Bernina and said, "The pilot is a gamble. But we're confident, if you'll give us the funding for all 13 of our first shows, we can get them posted online. Not only will it have a national appeal, but internationally we can reach people all over the world."

The advantages were overwhelming. We also decided that the Internet video has to come in a small size. It has to. That's the technology we have. If you're sitting close to your computer, it doesn't look that small.

We also decided to do DVDs. We would wait until the season aired. Then we would release a DVD so people could also purchase those. Then they could watch them on their big plasma screens.

Martin Favre, president of Bernina, asked, "What will you do on this website that will bring people back day after day?" The answer was, "We will have members submit stories about quilts."

The shows would air every three weeks. In between those shows, we would have little quilt stories. End of story. That's all we were going to build.

Then it started growing. The ideas started flowing from the question, "What will you do to bring people back day after day?" Now we have built a website that is as important, if not more important, than the shows themselves.

We encourage people to go online. They will see that we have built the world's largest online quilt community, and the world's largest online quilt gallery. They can search for quilts.

Star members can use the search engine for special searches. Say they want to search for log cabin quilts in Finland. All they have to do is enter "Finland" and "log cabin quilts." It will find only log cabin quilts submitted by members living in Finland.

If you wanted to find a member in Ireland because you were planning an Irish vacation, you could search for "members Ireland." You can view their profiles. You can email them directly from the site. Maybe you could start a pen pal relationship with somebody and then meet them when you go.

There's an amazing connectivity. The website is so vast, people need to spend time there. Once they do, they'll know what they want to do and where they want to play.

We have recently started member blogs. Blogging is a big deal. It's basically an online diary. You write the story of your life and let people

comment on it. You show pictures of your quilt in progress and let people comment on it.

You can get help with your project. Instead of getting help from your quilt guild, you can get help from the entire world quilt community.

It is an amazing venture. People might look at it and think, "I can't afford \$24 a month." You get a lot for \$24 for the series. You receive all 13 shows, an entire season. That membership doesn't expire until the end of 2008. It's very reasonably priced for what we offer.

Penny: I'm going to open it up and allow people to ask their questions.

Participant: When you machine quilt, what kind of a machine do you use?

Ricky: I use a Bernina.

Participant: It's just a regular home sewing machine then. It's not a long-arm.

Ricky: No. I sew on a Bernina 730. Almost all of my quilts are quilted on that domestic sewing machine. As I said earlier, I do have a George machine from APQS. I use that sometimes. I teach people how to use a regular sewing machine because not everyone has the budget for that larger machine. I do most of my quilting on my Bernina.

Participant: Thank you. That gives me hope.

Participant: Many of your quilts have a spiritual theme about them, in particular "Passage" and "Simple Gift." Can you tell us about themes in your work? Do they relate to your music, which also has a lot of spiritual themes running through it?

Ricky: I like the word spiritual. I think of myself as a spiritual person. I did have a pretty significant Christian upbringing. My spirituality now is different. I'm

not going to say it's esoteric. I don't want to call it non-Christian. I just really care about the inner workings of people's lives.

The way I deliver the message in my seminars, some people feel like they've been to church, even though I haven't talked about church in any form or fashion.

The quilt "Passage" was a grieving quilt about a life that's on the other side of this one. It's mysterious. We can't quite see it, but it's not so unfriendly. That's what that quilt was about.

I never thought of "Simple Gift" as a spiritual quilt, but it's based on the old shaker tune, the American folksong. People can find serenity just looking at that quilt.

In my music, there are two things I can think of. On "Heart and Soul," I play a hymn tune called "Nettleton." "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" is what people know it as.

That's there because that CD is a document of my life. It's an autobiography in music. I conducted church choirs for so long, hymns were a part of my life. I wanted at least one hymn on that album.

The "Sacred Age" CD is more an internalization of inner peace. The Native American spirit in the area I live in is very strong. I composed an entire album based around the inner peace you feel when you're in this valley.

Participant: Ricky, what is the name of the dye you used to dye your fabrics?

Ricky: It's a kind of dye. It's not a name. It's procion. It's MX fiber-reactive dye. If you search for Pro Chemical Company or Dharma Trading Company on Google, you will find MX dyes or procion dyes. They're cold-water dyes.

Participant: Ricky, where can you get wash-away thread on the cone?

Ricky: You don't want it, and I'll tell you why. It is fragile. It does not have a long shelf life, so buy it in the 100-yard spools. There is a company that has it in a 500-yard spool. If you accidentally get one drop of water on that expensive 500-yard spool, it will seep in there and ruin half of it.

It is better to keep them on those small cones. Just buy several of them. Keep them in a Ziploc bag. Only buy it when you're going to use it. Don't store it and use it a year and a half from now.

Participant: I love your idea about the basting. I'm a long-arm quilter. Our guild has bees that hand quilt all the time. I volunteer to baste the quilts for our guild.

Ricky: If they're going to wet the quilt, it's a great way. Don't spritz it. It needs to be wet. There is always the risk the fabrics might bleed if they weren't washed.

I should mention that synthropol is a dye-washing detergent. If you have a quilt that bled in the wash, even with commercial fabrics, wash it again in synthropol. You can scrub some synthropol in areas that bleed. You only need about a tablespoon or two per laundry load.

In my experience, people who had a bleeding problem used synthropol, and it went away. I mention that for those of you wetting your quilt. You have to get the quilt wet enough to get rid of that water-soluble thread.

Participant: Ricky, I'm new to this. If you were going to pick a quilt to start out with, what would that quilt be?

Ricky: That's a hard question. What do you like? Do you like traditional things, or do you like contemporary things?

Participant: My grandmother was an old-time quilter. She pieced them together. My mom does a lot of square quilts. Unfortunately, they didn't hand down their skills to me. It's something I love. I have a 100-plus-year-old quilting frame. I've tried to do several quilts. I haven't done them well.

Ricky: What kinds of quilts have you done? Are they block quilts?

Participant: They're just simple square-to-square quilts.

Ricky: Are you using a rotary cutter and a mat?

Participant: I didn't used to, but now I am.

Ricky: It makes a difference. Are you looking to do something traditional or contemporary?

Participant: My husband and I are into lighthouses. I'd like to make a nice quilt for our bed for him for Christmas.

Ricky: You could get online or go to your local quilt shop and find a very simple lighthouse block pattern. You could find some wonderful stripes for the body of the lighthouse and other things that would work. Every lighthouse could be different. You could find something like that very easily. That's what I would encourage you to do.

Participant: My problem is that all our local fabric/quilting stores have shut down. Getting to a fabric store that's affordable is not easy.

Ricky: I can't help you there. You can go online. If the stores aren't in your area, then it's time to go shopping online.

Participant: Is there a site online that you could recommend?

Ricky: There are a lot of them. There is www.StitchinHeaven.com and www.eQuilter.com. Also just go to Google and put in “quilt fabrics shop online” or something similar. You will find plenty of places.

Participant: Fabrics are not a problem. I have a great fabric stash. It’s a matter of putting it together.

Ricky: This is when I go back to The Quilt Show. I talked at the end of the interview about The Quilt Show. You could join The Quilt Show, and become a member of the world quilt community. There we have a forum, a message board you could use to find help.

You could post, “There’s a 911. Help me learn to quilt.” You ask your question, and 23,000 people look at that and find a way to help. That’s the advantage of The Quilt Show. Give it a try.

Participant: Ricky, I know you’ve moved to a small town in Colorado. You’ve probably turned it upside down with your art studio. I know you do retreats. Would you cover a little about what happens?

Ricky: For those of you who are interested, the retreats are three or four times a year. They’re five days long. I’m with the students from about 8:30 until 5:00, but they can sew 24 hours a day.

The retreats are all about finding your creative muse. I don’t teach a particular subject or class. I work with every student individually, and guide them through whatever they want to do for that week.

For more information, go to my website, click on “Retreats.” Submit your name for the lottery list. I choose 10 students for each retreat from the lottery list. It’s the only way I can be fair.

I love the people who keep coming back. They're my dearest quilting friends. At the same time, I have about 350 people who want to come. I don't want to leave them out either, so I use a lottery system.

Participant: You said you have a 730 Bernina. Do you use the stitch regulator, or do you do it totally free?

Ricky: I do it totally free, but here's the thing. I was machine quilting without the stitch regulator before the stitch regulator came along.

Libby Lehman and I were invited to Switzerland to look at the BSR, the stitch regulator, and provide input on it. There are a few things I've had a bit of a say-so in, and I love it.

I think it is a great tool for people who still feel a little bit skeptical about doing their quilting and getting even stitches. I don't think it is mandatory.

I just look at my mom, who could never free-motion quilt as easily. If she put a quilt under there, it would work better for her. Libby Lehman says it's insurance, so she uses it.

I call it training wheels. I think it's one of the best things to ever happen to a sewing machine.

Participant: I have seen your show. I've gone to one of the tapings. I bought "Grand Finale." Between that show, www.TheQuiltShow.com and that DVD, I have been set free.

I thread baste with water-soluble thread, and I absolutely love it. I machine quilt. I took my quilt into the local quilt shop, and the owner swore it was long-arm quilted.

Ricky: Congratulations. That's a good testimony. I appreciate you saying so.

Participant: I do want to say thank you, and I appreciate all of this.

Ricky: That means a lot. We work hard to bring it to you, so I appreciate the comment.

Participant: I also bought myself a guitar. It's for my ears only. I pluck it, and it really helps my quilting.

Ricky: Did you write something on the forum about that?

Participant: Yes, on the forum where you asked what the show has done for me. I just wanted to personally thank you for all of this. I now look at my quilt as I'm constructing it and decide what kind of quilt pattern I'm going to put into it. It has helped, and I thank you.

Ricky: I hope to see you again down the road.

Participant: Ricky, do you have any special techniques or tips about getting a queen or king size quilt in the arm of the sewing machine?

Ricky: Once again, I'm going to refer you to the "Grand Finale" DVD. It is incredible, and I'm not just tooting my own horn. You will find some good visuals on that topic. Here's the No. 1 thing. Thin batting gives you the ability to get more of that quilt in there.

No. 2, remember you only have to get to the middle of a quilt. Even if it's 90 inches square, you only have to get 45 inches of it in that machine, and you only have to be in the middle for a very short time. There is not much surface area that you would call the middle of a quilt.

Finally, when a quilt is mashed up under the arm of the machine, lift it up so that your hand can go underneath the bulk rather than mashing into the bulk. Those are the best things I could tell you.

Participant: I never thought of that.

Penny: Thank you, Ricky. Thank you to the Eavesdropping Quilters. This was a wonderful call with some extremely valuable information.

If you'd like a recording of the call, you can still get it at today's price by going to www.How-to-Quilt.com/ricky.shtml. Also on that page, you can order both of his books.

Think about joining the official Eavesdropping Club. By joining the club, you get each month's recording at a discounted rate. You get access to the call transcript, so you can listen to the call and read it. We will notify you when the Eavesdropping worksheet is ready.

In November we will have two "Eavesdrop on a Telephone Conversation" interviews. On November 13, we will have Arlene Stamper and her daughter Melissa Harris. Arlene taught me about coloring quilts. She and her daughter now design quilt patterns.

Then on November 27, Dierdra McElroy from Roxanne International will join us to talk about hand quilting and fabric. I'm going to post some video clips prior to that call.

You can find out more by signing up for our newsletter. Think about what inquiring quilting minds want to know so we can put together a list of questions for each of those calls.

Until that time, happy quilting, and thank you so much. Goodbye.