

Navajo weaver shares lore, love of ancient craft

By SUSAN FALK
Correspondent, The Oregonian

DAMASCUS — Pearl Sunrise looked right at home in the rural setting of Damascus. The natural hues of her Navajo Indian garb seemed to blend in with the surrounding meadows. Her boots and wrapped leggings made her look as if she were ready for a jaunt through the woods.

But she was about 1,000 miles away from her home in New Mexico and the

'People say to me, 'Oh, you do so much in arts and crafts.' But I'm just a typical Navajo woman.'

dry, desert country that inspires much of her weaving.

Brought here by the Portland Handweavers Guild, Sunrise held a three-day workshop in Navajo weaving last weekend at the Damascus Pioneer Craft School. About 12 women participated in the workshop.

Half of the students had some experience with Navajo weaving, said school director Audrey Moore. Moore said she has been teaching Navajo weaving, which requires a specialized upright loom, since studying under Sunrise's sister in a Portland Art Museum class 10 years ago.

Like her sister, Sunrise has traveled

extensively to teach the art of weaving Navajo rugs. In fact, under the auspices of the U.S. State Department, she has gone as far as South Africa to teach.

Now, as the recent recipient of a Fulbright fellowship, she is planning a one-year sojourn in New Zealand to teach Navajo weaving to, among others, Maori people who are the native inhabitants of the country.

Her training as a weaver began when she was a small child, Sunrise told the Damascus class. In the mornings, when she was sent off to herd the family's sheep, her mother gave her a bag of wool to carry with her. At lunchtime she was expected to card the wool. When she became adept at that, her mother sent a spindle along so she could spin the wool during lunch.

Sunrise said she still does every step of the weaver's craft herself, from raising the sheep and making the natural dyes to designing and weaving the rug.

She uses Indian tea to get a gold color, mahogany roots to make brown, canaigre root for orange and gold and prickly pears for purple. She will not use chemical dyes, she said, because the colors in Navajo weaving are always those that are found in nature. Designs are also inspired by nature, as well as by Navajo legend and traditional symbolism.

Before clothing styles of the white men influenced Navajo dress, rugs were used for clothing, Sunrise said. She explained that rectangular rugs were sewn together at the sides and shoulders. The sack-like dresses resembled the garb early Navajos made from animal skins or tree bark.

Seven years ago, while she was



The Oregonian/CLAUDIA J. HOWELL

TEACHING ART — Pearl Sunrise (right) teaches Navajo weaving to Yvette Sontos at Damascus Pioneer Craft School in a class sponsored

by Portland Handweavers Guild. Sunrise does each step of weaver's craft herself, from growing sheep to making natural dyes.

teaching at Tsaile Navajo College, Sunrise was invited by the State Department to participate in a program designed to help artisans of Lesotho, South Africa, refine their work to make it more marketable. After two years of paperwork and planning, Sunrise departed for eight weeks among the weavers, potters and painters of Lesotho, south of Johannesburg.

For someone who years earlier had been reluctant to leave the reservation to go to college, going halfway around the world was a big step. But once she got to Africa, she found the people to be much like herself, Sunrise said.

"The Africans said I was a different

kind of American because I was so much like them," Sunrise said. "We have a similar lifestyle and we herd livestock. Like them, I spoke simply and straightforward."

The people of Lesotho had a long tradition of weaving with mohair yarn, made from the Angora goats they herd. But they benefited from her help in refining yarns and developing natural dyes.

"Weaving is all the same everywhere," she said, explaining how her techniques could be applied by people half a world away. "Just the setup is different."

After nearly dying about 15 years ago, the art of Navajo weaving is enjoying a renaissance, thanks to the increased number of Navajo teachers on the reservation, Sunrise said.

"There were very few teachers and very few people who went away to become teachers," she explained. "With the strong values of the Navajo it is very difficult to exist in a university. Our values of thinking and way of life are totally different from the Anglo world. Also, there is a language barrier."

She said as a student at the University of New Mexico, where she re-

ceived a master's degree in art education, she often considered leaving the alien environment of the university and returning to the reservation.

"When I talked to my parents about quitting school they reminded me of the legend of the Navajo twins who must travel a long distance and overcome all kinds of obstacles to find their father, the sun," she said.

Sunrise currently teaches weaving, pottery, basketry and painting at United World College in Montezuma, N.M.

"People say to me, 'Oh, you do so much in arts and crafts,'" Sunrise said. "But I'm just a typical Navajo woman."