



Libby's Way

A Tribute to
Elizabeth “Libby” Mills

STORY BY
ALISON FRYE

PHOTO BY
LAURIE LARUE

Last fall when we started planning this issue—The Green Issue—we were excited to write about Libby’s decades of work protecting open spaces. Then, in November, we learned Libby had cancer, and in January, she died. So today we tell a bit more of her story, all of it connected to making the world, both the Earth and its people, a better place.

Open Spaces

*We're here for a little short time.
We have to steward what we live on.*

LIBBY MILLS, 2020

GO FOR A WALK

This simple act can lead to a cascade of positive outcomes. The camaraderie of the friends you walk with, a long and healthy life, and, if you're Libby, a legacy of conserved land that protects open spaces and the species that inhabit them.

Raise your hand if you have hiked to the Pinnacle in Westminster West, taken in the fall colors or a sunset, and marveled that a place that beautiful is so easy to access. This local site, with its spectacular view, was historically a space the public used, but it was not public land. In 1992, the Windmill Hill Pinnacle Association (WHPA) formed, with the initial goal of creating a public trail that led to the Pinnacle and acquiring the land of the Pinnacle itself. Libby served on the WHPA and Putney Mountain Association boards for almost 30 years. "Her vision of what could be possible was incredibly important to the growth and viability of both organizations," said Geordie Heller '74, former head of the Putney Mountain Association board. Libby effectively negotiated with landowners in support of the organizations' visions to conserve the land of the Putney Mountain/Windmill Hill ridgeline. What began as a goal of one trail leading to a summit has expanded to become an organization that stewards and protects over 2,500 acres of land that connects five towns, running more than thirteen miles largely along the ridgeline and with miles of hiking trails.

In December 2022, Libby attended an outdoor celebration at a local trailhead and received an early 94th birthday present. The Putney Mountain Association had recently acquired a parcel of land long held privately by the Hinton family. Libby invested decades of persistent work and negotiation in acquiring this land, which links the trail network by joining protected properties. In her honor, people will, from now on, walk the trail that now bears her name: Libby's Way.

The next time you're in the area, make the time to see these places. Go for a walk. Look around you, and thank Libby for her work at making it so easy to lose (and find) yourself in the woods. As she said in a recent interview, "If you're having a bad day, you might go out to the Pinnacle and feel a bit better."

Right:
Libby in the Vermont
woods she worked
years to conserve



A Life Lived Fully

MORE OF SAME

Libby met her future husband, Bob Mills, at summer camp when she was 14 years old. They stayed in touch and married in her early 20s. "He was my ticket to adventure," she reflected. Together they bought an old farmhouse on 60 acres in Westminster West, Vermont, raised two children, Matt '71 and Anne '72, bought land and built a rustic cabin on Swan's Island in Maine, and went outdoors as much as they could, camping, gardening, hiking, living. At home among the trails and beaver ponds of Vermont and on the rocky coast of Maine, Libby connected to the earth and to the people who cared for it. "I love being shed of all of the trappings of indoor living," Libby said with a smile.

She also knew her share of loss. Libby and Bob's daughter, Anne, died at age 32, and Bob died eight years later. Libby then spent a decade with Gib Taylor, a local artist, woodworker, and musician whose work filled Libby's home. Gib died, and at age 80, Libby

married her long-time friend John Barnett. They thrived together for ten years, until his death in 2017.

In a 2018 interview, Libby reflected on her relationships, "I suppose I should really be grieving all three of those losses, and I guess I do in a way, but on the other hand, I feel as though I've been so lucky to have three wonderful relationships with three wonderful guys." Lies Pasterkamp put it in perspective when she said, "With all of these losses, she is not bitter."

And Libby walked. Long walks. Many walks. At age 91, she hiked the entire WHPA trail system. For years, Libby had a weekly date with the Wednesday Walkers. Together, they explored the WHPA trails and many others. Lisa Chase '69, also a Wednesday Walker, offered this in 2017: "We stay off travelled roads and walk all the ancient roads and visit old stone works buried in the woods: bridges, stone culverts, foundations, mill ponds. We find views. I am one of the youngest ones in the group. Libby Mills out-walks us all."

In addition to her thirty-plus years of teaching at Putney and her work with local conservation groups, Libby was one of the original founders of the Green Mountain Spinnery in Putney. During a brief time in jail following the 1977 protest of the Seabrook, NH, nuclear facility, Libby and Claire Wilson (parent of Jennifer Wilson '74 and David Wilson '75) put their heads together and helped bring the spinnery to life. Started in 1982, the spinnery helps sustain local sheep herds and has built and strengthened a community of fiber artists in southeastern Vermont. She was a champion for conservation, human rights, and justice throughout her long life.

Libby's was a life lived well and lived fully. Longtime Putney teacher Brian Cohen remembered, "Libby and I shared a short-hand—'more of same'—these among Bob Mills's final words, when asked what he would do if he had more time to live. Libby lived that way."



Left: Bob and Libby Mills, partners in adventure. Above: Libby with son Matt on Swan's Island in 2021. PHOTO BY MARTI STONE.

*Every day counts.
You really want to do
what your heart tells
you you have to do.*

LIBBY MILLS, 2018



Teacher

The weaving and the threads speak of continuity. That's what life is all about.

LIBBY MILLS, 2018

FRAGILE BEGINNINGS

The Putney School's weaving studio hums today with the rhythm of focused work. It is alive with color and texture. Music floats quietly from a corner speaker. Now occupying the whole third floor of the Reynolds Building, it's difficult to remember the program's humble beginnings. The space is a sanctuary. It is filled with love and with light.

Current Putney students ascend in droves to the upstairs studio. They spin, dye, weave, and knit their way through project weeks, academic classes, and evening arts. Classes have waiting lists. Everywhere you look on the Putney campus, students are wearing things they created with their own hands, dyed with plants grown in a student-created garden.

Cap Sease '65, now renowned in the fiber arts world for her designs, studied weaving with Libby soon after the weaving program's founding. She captured those first years—the determination, the humor, the figuring-it-out—in remarks she wrote for a celebration of Libby last November. “It was very dark, with no windows and no natural light. We had to make do with a few feeble fluorescent lights—not the greatest for working with colors. And we did have the occasional surprise when finally seeing our finished woven pieces in the light of day!”

“Loom maintenance was the stinker. . . Many were the hours spent on the floor under looms fiddling, tweaking, and trying to fix something. In good Putney tradition, we learned by doing, by trial and error, by guess and by golly and eventually we got there in the end. And we learned so much. Everything I know about loom mechanics and maintenance I learned in the Putney weaving studio with Libby.”

“But most of all, we had fun. I remember lots of laughter accompanying our efforts. The weaving studio was my happy place throughout my four years at Putney. It wasn't until years later that I realized what an important role Libby and the weaving studio played in my Putney education. They reinforced the idea that my parents instilled in me, that I could do pretty much anything I set my mind to as long as I was willing to work hard, be patient, and persevere.”

Libby, too, reflected with delight about the weaving program's modest origins, “The intrepid would-be weavers were diligent, mastering the rudiments and producing a few basic items on a collection of rickety looms of unknown origin. Building on this fragile beginning, the weaving room expanded in space; it was a great day when the class, with help, took down the partition between the eastern classroom and the dark space beside it!



Top: Brian Cohen, Libby, Cap Sease '65, and Melissa Johnson '77. Melissa has grown the fiber arts program since Libby's retirement, and weaved the tapestry to commemorate the Libby Mills Fund. Left: Libby Mills, Melissa Johnson, and Cap Sease '65 among the colors and textures of Putney's weaving studio

The new room quickly filled with more looms and more challenging projects. Support came from all quarters, while the outside world of the '60s and '70s opened to wider views of art vs. craft. Eventually weaving as an activity gained the legitimacy to be taught as an academic class, with more attention to the universality of textiles, design, and cultural use.”

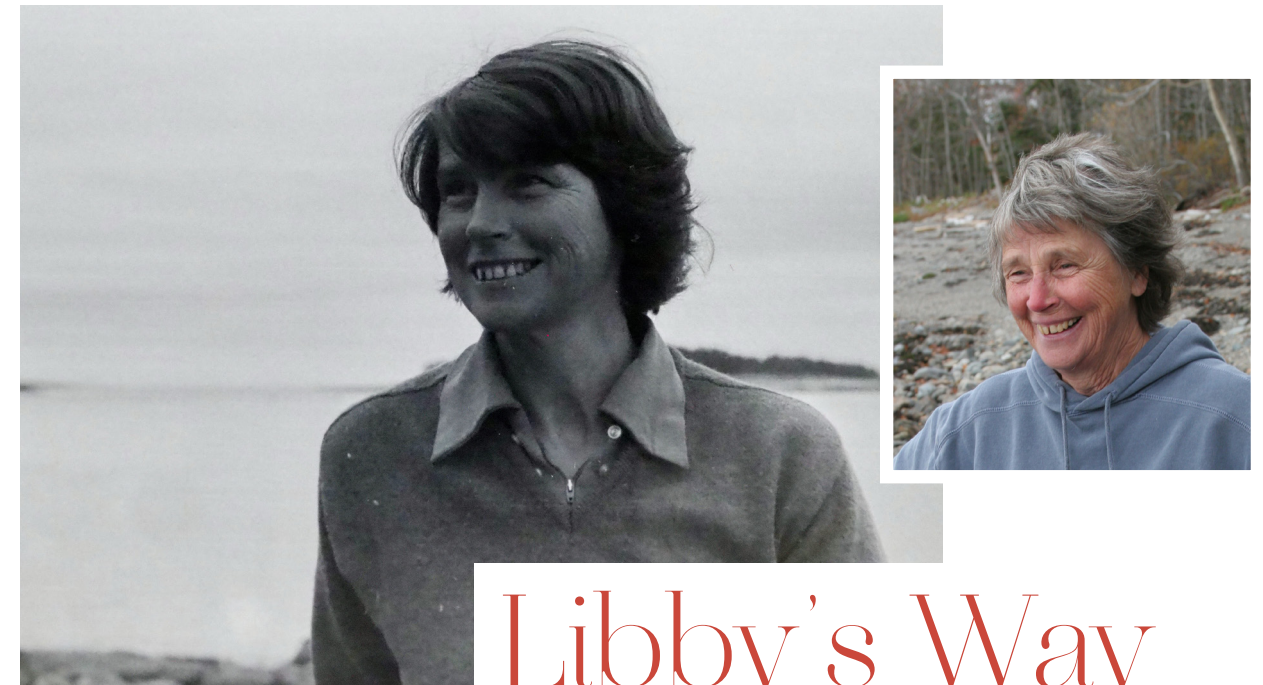
Seeds of creativity were planted and sowed in the weaving studio. Sven Huseby, former head of school and Libby's neighbor, understands well the importance of this space. “As students worked,

they talked with Libby about so many things beyond weaving. It became a sanctuary for many.” In adulthood, former Putney students continue to create and to value art, including textiles. “Libby taught me how to spin using a drop spindle, and it's still something that brings me peace and joy,” said Rachel Trumper Debasitis '77. And Marshall Nalle Ayers '75 remembers the learning of it all: “Shear the sheep, card the wool, spin the wool, dye the wool, weave the wool, Libby taught me how from start to finish.”

And now, the weaving studio and program will benefit in perpetuity from The Libby Mills Fund for Fiber Arts, the brainchild of Brian Cohen and Cap Sease, established in 2021 “to honor Libby for creating the fiber arts program at The Putney School and for nurturing and inspiring generations of Putney students.” A handful of Libby's closest friends gathered on campus last November to celebrate Libby and surprise her with this fund, which has seen abundant generosity from alumni and friends as it builds toward its goal.

In a beautiful and light-filled room near the ocean, she closed the circle embraced by loved ones. Her passing was quiet and peaceful. In one of her last wakeful moments, she said, “It is a good day to take a long walk.”

LIES PASTERKAMP, 2023



Libby's Way

THE FIBER OF STUDENT SOULS

Libby and Bob welcomed students into their homes, from struggling students who needed a few days of respite and comfort to Long Fall and Long Spring trips at their rustic Maine cabin. Amy Ng '76 spent many a night at the Mills home during her time at Putney. She wrote in a December letter to Libby, “Your house was a safe haven when life became overwhelming to a teenager. I remember many evenings around the wood stove and climbing into Annie's bed. . . You have shown an unconditional and genuine love that I have yet encountered in another human being. You know how to listen and provide suggestions, but without judgment.” Legions of students felt that embrace. Until her death, Libby's Vermont and Maine homes remained a destination for her former students and colleagues.

Libby's Way. It's a trail a person can walk, and it's a life a person can emulate. From the many voices that sent love following her death, the consistent themes of Libby's compassion, gentle encouragement, and ability to listen without judgment shone through. Libby's former students will remember her, in their words, as a comforting anchor, the fiber of students' souls at Putney, and one of the greatest humans to ever walk this earth. ■

To support the Libby Mills Fund for Fiber Arts at The Putney School visit putneyschool.org/libbymills