

# Winds of Taliesin West

Just at the close of the school year, I received an invitation to attend a dinner at Taliesin West, the world famous artist's retreat, school of architecture, and "commune" founded by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1938. This desert camp has long been a local tourist attraction. It is an architectural "Mecca" with visitors from around the world attending daily. My first visit was in 1969, ten years after Wright's death, as I began my studies as a freshman architecture student. I was just another tourist, and I could have never imagined back then that my life and the tempo of Taliesin would later become entwined in a myriad of ways. Since then, I have been a consulting landscape architect to the Taliesin architectural firm. I've been a visiting lecturer to the students at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. I was even hired by the FLW foundation to be a draughtsman on their payroll in 1973, helping restore the Arizona Biltmore Hotel from a devastating fire. I've taken the guided tour and shared a meal with the Taliesin Fellowship so often over the years that I now take this experience too much for granted.

So, in inviting my 12-year-old daughter along with me for her first visit to Taliesin West, I was unprepared for what lay ahead that evening.

After dinner, we had a "starlight tour" by an old friend of mine, Susan Jacobs Lockhart. I worked with her back in 1973 during the restoration of the Arizona Biltmore Hotel. She is a radiant personality and the only person I know to have grown up in two Frank Lloyd Wright houses, the Jacobs Usonian House and the Jacobs II Solar Hemicycle House. As far as I know, Susan has been at Taliesin since she was a young woman. Megan liked Susan and her tour very much, delighting in each new space, the unusual furniture, the collection of Japanese art, and a massive stone fireplace in virtually every room. Of particular interest was finding out that many of the students live in small shelters of their own design and construction in the desert just north of the main compound.

The richness of this new experience and the magic of Taliesin seemed to blow gently into her imagination. Her eyes were dancing with all that she saw and the artist within had been kindled. This soon-to-be-a-teenager even went so far as to say that Taliesin West was "...probably the coolest place" she had ever visited. As we stood at the prow of the desert terrace and looked out at the twinkling lights of Scottsdale and Phoenix beyond, I knew we were sharing a very magical evening.



▲ James Abell mixes mortar at the "House of Three Courtyards" in 1978.

▼ The now famous draughting room of Taliesin West begins to take shape in 1938.

Almost from the beginning, Megan was awestruck by the desert setting and loved the entire campus. She enjoyed walking around and exploring the fountains, sculpture court, and gardens on her own just a bit during our informal outdoor buffet dinner. The temperature wasn't at all hot for May and we had a really fine caterer for the event. During our dinner, a gentle breeze began to blow across the desert terrace. The sweet smells of the great Sonoran desert wrapped around our group and sweetened our palate. A little free dessert for our lungs! Odd to realize that 33 years after my first visit that I know so many people here and have so many memories, yet my daughter is beginning this cycle anew.

For me, one of the more intriguing aspects about Taliesin West is that it is ever under construction and always changing, like my own home. Megan found it interesting that Frank Lloyd Wright had built his place in 1938 with a bunch of amateurs just like her Dad had done in 1978 with the house that she has lived in for her entire life. Now that I'm getting older, it's hard to believe that the design of Taliesin West and Tempe's "House of Three Courtyards" is separated by only 40 years. Yikes!

Megan ended the evening by announcing that she wants to live in the desert at Taliesin West in a small dwelling of her own design and that she will "go to college" at Taliesin to study dance, sculpture, and interior design [she has long said she wants to be an interior designer or a pediatrician]. When we got home, she immediately took out pencil and paper and started sketching her own individual dwelling. She wants to get started building it in our backyard immediately!

Last night, I read Megan some different bedtime stories-- she's really too old for bedtime stories, but still enjoys them so-- I read from Wright's autobiography about the building of Taliesin West and showed her pictures of young men toiling in the desert sun. Sometimes, even I forget about how terribly demanding the construction enterprise can be. Are you sure you are ready for building, Megan? Sleep tight, you have your future full ahead of you and many sweet desert winds yet to smell.

James Logan Abell ©2002