

JOYCE PETTER

1927–

Joyce Petter has played a significant role in shaping the aesthetic consciousness of the Saugatuck-Douglas area as a community activist, preservationist, art dealer, and gallery owner.

Joyce Anderson Ronningen Petter was born in St Paul, Minnesota in 1927 to Ruth Nelson Anderson and Helmer Ronningen of Swedish and Norwegian ancestry. In the 1930's, during the Great Depression, her father began his career in business, moving the family many times. Joyce lived in Minnesota until she was 7 and later moved to New Orleans, Chicago, and then Vicksburg, Michigan when her father bought a farm in 1939.

The family moved back to Chicago in 1943, where Joyce graduated from Evanston Township High School in 1944. She received a Bachelor's degree from Northwestern University in 1948. She later studied art history at Aquinas College and the University of Cincinnati.

In 1944, Joyce met Bill Petter before he went overseas to serve in the US Navy. Joyce and Bill married in 1948, and moved to Vicksburg to start a family while Joyce taught school and Bill finished his degree. He joined the family business, Ronningen-Petter Company, later part of Dover Corporation, a filter manufacturing company. Joyce and Bill moved to Kalamazoo in 1950 and lived there from 1950-1970 where they raised their 5 children.

From their first apartment through their many moves, Joyce took pleasure in building or remodeling at least 21 properties. Bill traveled the world for business and Joyce often was able to accompany him. Joyce was on her own during these trips and would visit the local art museums and local galleries. She didn't realize that she was training her eye for quality artwork.

In 1973, Joyce opened a gallery of American arts and crafts in Saugatuck named PRAJNA, formed from letters of her family names—Petter-Ronningen-Anderson-Joyce with the addition of na which means 'for the people'. Joyce eventually ran two galleries, Prajna I, a fine art gallery located at 134 Butler Street and Prajna II at the corner of Hoffman and Water Street featuring American craft. She sold Prajna II in the 1980's.

In 1993 Joyce purchased and renovated the Grey Gables building on Blue Star Highway in Douglas. This historic building was home to the River Guild in the 1930s and continues to operate as Petter Galleries thirty years later.

On a trip to Boston, Joyce was encouraged to see a group of galleries collaborating for weekend openings. In 1977 she began the annual Gallery Stroll in Saugatuck and Douglas now in its 45th year.

"We just pushed it and pushed it and pushed it. I wanted to build an art scene. What happens is, as you make your art reputation, art customers come. They go to all the galleries, and that builds and then even more galleries move here. You always want to open your gallery where there's another gallery."

In 1987, Joyce led the battle to stop McDonalds from building a restaurant in Saugatuck. After two rejections from the Saugatuck Zoning Board of Appeals and public hearings packed with outraged citizens, McDonald's retreated. No city had ever prevented a McDonalds moving in until Joyce's campaign. This protest in Saugatuck made the national news. The New York Times caught wind and did an article on "the quaint little town in Michigan."

After a 34 year long career as an art dealer and gallery owner, Joyce retired at age 80. She is currently living in South Haven and is an avid bridge player at age 96.

Joyce Petter researched by fellow
Team HerStorian, Maryjo Lemanski.

Maryjo Lemanski



Ruth Ronningen was busy at home raising...From left to right Bob, mother Ruth, Jeann and Joyce.



"I bought the building at 134 Butler Street, originally the Elm's Hotel, and opened for business on June 7, 1973. My first sale was a \$6.00 pair of earrings."



In 1993 Joyce purchased and renovated the Grey Gables building in Douglas. It contained a barber shop, a real estate office and 5 apartments. This property was formerly the River Guild, designed and built by Carl Hoerman in 1939.



Group portrait of the extended Petter family
Artist: Eve Whitaker