

Irene's (Mostly Purple) UFO's

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Irene's (Mostly Purple) UFO's by Nancy Allen In August of 2006, a lovely elderly lady named Irene came to see me after the quilt shop where I teach referred her. She had fallen and injured her shoulder and was unable to quilt. She was getting up in years and her children had urged her to get her sewing room in order and finish up some projects. She brought me three quilts to finish for her. One was a small Christmas wall hanging, kind of like Sun Bonnet Sue. Another was a large lovely hand appliquéd quilt with tulips in several shades of pink, leaves and vines. The last was all hand pieced of little squares and triangles of several small purple, pink, green and light blue calicos. It took me a few weeks of work to fix the problems, piece rows, add borders and get the quilts ready for long-arm quilting. The little wall hanging just needed binding. I called the number Irene had given me and left a message saying she could come pick them up, or I would deliver them to the quilter if she preferred. A few days later, Linda, the shop owner, called me to ask if I had heard what had happened to Irene. Her daughter found her sitting in her Sunday clothes, in her favorite chair, with a book in her lap. She had peacefully passed away. I didn't even know that she was 85 years old! Her daughter Julie asked me to have the quilts quilted and to call when they were finished. A month or so later, she came to pick up the quilts. The purple one was to have been a Christmas present for a family member, but we didn't know for whom. She said there were several other UFO's and asked if I'd be interested in finishing them as well. I was happy to do so; it would have been a shame to leave them as UFO's forever. Julie brought 2 more projects: The first was a very large Amish style sampler. It had 16 blocks, all made from solids of red, blue, deep pink, black, and of course, purple. A few blocks had been cut out but never pieced, a couple of blocks needed to be taken apart and fixed, and I had to come up with 1 block on my own. The sashing had not been completed either. It was a challenging but fun project. The other project we called Julie's Quilt. Julie could remember as a child, helping her mother pick out many purple fabrics, mostly calicos and small prints. She helped cut out 5" squares. Her mother then arranged the squares, pinned them in rows and labeled each row. The cutting was done quite crudely, just as a small child would have done. Irene had wisely used a 1/2" seam allowance. But, only a few rows were ever sewn together. Julie remembered that she was supposed to help her mom with this project, but was not really interested and so as the years passed, it just never was completed. I also found a striped fabric that worked great as the border with mitered corners. I took both quilt tops to be quilted by our very talented long-arm quilter, Tara, and they turned out beautifully. Julie was thrilled to have her quilt done after all these years. In the box with all the purple fabric were several more yards of additional purple fabric. This was of a totally different style than Julie's quilt, one of them almost an Asian print. It was obviously meant for a different project. Julie asked if I could choose a pattern and make a quilt from this purple stash. I quickly grabbed a "Quilt in a Day" book and showed her a pattern I have made several times that works well. She said "go for it!" and I got started. I estimated that there were about 2 yards of 6 different fabrics. I cut strips and sewed. I cut squares and sewed some more. I cut triangles and sewed. On and on it went. Before I realized what I had done, I had pieced many more blocks than I would need for just one quilt. And there were still several yards of fabric remaining. I checked with Julie and her sister Jinni (all 5 of Irene's children have "J" names) and they decided I might as well make 2 quilts. These would not be as large as the earlier quilts, so I could quilt them myself on my home machine. It was fun making them similar, but with different borders. They turned out well, if I do say so myself! I later learned from Linda at the quilt shop that Irene loved Quilt in a Day. When Julie picked up the 2 purple quilts, she brought me 1 last project. This one was all in blues, surprisingly. It was sort of a star, similar to a large lone star, only with 3 intersecting stars and each diamond area was made up of gradating strips. There were about 12 different blue and white fabrics in all. It must have been quite a difficult pattern and I could see why Irene got stuck. It was unclear what she intended it to be, maybe just a tablecloth, maybe a quilt. Julie wanted it made into a quilt. Luckily, there was a yard extra from about 6 of the fabrics. I took it apart in a few places to fix intersections, and sewed strips all around to frame it. There were 24 points and 18 miters! I then puzzled over whether to try and piece white fabric or to appliqué the whole thing onto a large square. I ended up doing the appliqué and then thought about a border. I chose one with gradating strips that appear to be woven like chevrons. Another white border and it was ready for quilting. It will be labeled "Irene's last quilt" and will be stunning. From each of the projects, I have many scraps. I've told Julie and Jinni that I can use them when making charity quilts in my guild. They liked the idea that Irene's fabric scraps would be used to comfort patients at the hospital, migrant children or the homeless. They have made many donations of fabric, yarn and other craft items that they found while cleaning out their mom's house. This whole endeavor lasted over a year. I'm kind of sad that there are no more quilts from Irene to work on. Even though I only met her once, I felt close to her while working on her projects. It has been a real honor to help keep this lovely woman's quilting legacy going by making sure all the family members get a quilt "From Grandma's (mostly purple) Stash".