

Joyce Johnson, 84; sculptor and defender of Cape's dune shacks



By [Bryan Marquard](#) | GLOBE STAFF MAY 12, 2014

Amid the spare splendor of the Cape Cod dunes, where for many years she was a caretaker of one of the seashore's historic shacks, Joyce Johnson was lying on her back one day when her eyes opened to a slight sound. The dunes were so still she had heard the beating wings of birds flying by.

“You’d have to stay in one of the shacks to understand the absence of stimulation other than nature,” she told the Globe in 1988. “When you first get here, you fall asleep until you’re not tired anymore. The environment both saps and renews you.”

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During more than 50 years living year-round in Truro and North Eastham, Ms. Johnson helped preserve the dune shacks and much more. As a sculptor she formed figures from wood and clay and plaster. As journalist, and as a radio host interviewing a chorus of guests, she crafted a history of the land and shore and sky from which she drew creative sustenance.

“To say that Joyce lived on Cape Cod is to understate,” The Barnstable Patriot, to which she contributed articles, said in an editorial. “It’s more precise to say she shaped Cape Cod, applying her hands and heart to the region as she did to her materials of wood and stone.”

Ms. Johnson, who spent warmer months in a small Truro house she had built herself, died of complications of a stroke April 9 in a friend’s house in Orleans. She was 84, and in her final days friends filled her room with her art and with singing.

“There was a spirit in Joyce that was very unique in this world,” said Sue Fleming, who provided space in her home for Ms. Johnson after the stroke. “She brought a presence and a simplicity and ruggedness to life that not a lot of people bring.”

Ms. Johnson achieved simplicity in a life that was unusually full and that might, to the outside world, seem logistically complex. In the mid-1960s, she began running the Nauset School of Sculpture out of her family’s North Eastham home, where she kept a studio. That venture evolved into what is now the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, which she helped found and formerly led as its president.

Along with teaching sculpture, she wrote part time over the years for the Provincetown Advocate and Cape Codder newspapers, and she produced “The Sands of Time,” a show on WOMR-FM in Provincetown. She also was a founder of the Peaked Hill Trust, which preserves the dune shacks and runs a residency program, and she helped found the Outer Cape Artists in Residency Consortium.

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“Usually, people leave a legacy,” Fleming said. “Joyce leaves many legacies.”

To keep focus, and to be restored, Ms. Johnson returned to the dunes summer after summer.

“Everything is so spare,” she told the Globe in 1986. “Nothing gets in the way of the creative process; it is speeded up.” In an interview a couple of years later, she added that “as both a sculptor and a writer I have often wakened after a day or night in my shack and seen clearly that which was muddled or confused.”

The youngest of three children, Ms. Johnson grew up in North Andover and Concord. Her father, Charles Johnson, was a chemical engineer who worked in the woolen industry. Her mother, the former Dorothy Deacon, was from England and played piano.

At 10, Ms. Johnson began carving in wood. She graduated from Concord Academy, and at 26 moved to Spain to study sculpture. Returning home, she attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, graduating in 1962. Not long after she moved to Cape Cod, for many years dividing her time between her family's North Eastham home and the dune shacks. She also bought land in Truro in 1965 and slowly built her house, as much through artistry as carpentry.

In an artist's statement for the Addison Art Gallery in Orleans, which displays her work, Ms. Johnson wrote that "the choice of a rural seaside environment in which I live was not by chance." She was drawn to the "sublime ocean and dunes and excited by the endless changes in those visions that can pass like a moving camera, exciting me, calming me, and sending me to a meditative source from which works of art emerge."

"She was at home in the dunes," said Marnie Crawford Samuelson, a photographer who captured an evocative image of Ms. Johnson during a walk through the dunes a few years ago. "It was kind of her queendom out there."

Ms. Johnson's nephew, Charles Melcher, an associate professor of graphic design at Maine College of Art in Portland, called his aunt an "inspirational artist who lived a unique life that she mapped out for herself."

Part of the distinctive terrain in which she lived was the house she built, which had no electricity, a hand pump in the sink, and a 10-by-10-foot room she constructed "entirely from the dump except for the two-by-fours and nails," she said in an interview posted on the Provincetown Artist Registry website.

"She was an artist," said her longtime friend Josephine Del Deo of Provincetown. "She wanted to devote her time to her art. She didn't want to be tied down to an enormous mortgage or a large building space, so she made it very minimal."

She added that as a teacher and a friend, Ms. Johnson "was alive, present, and always on call. She wanted to bring the creative process to everyone she could."

Ms. Johnson "was innovative, she was creative, and her work was so elegant and gorgeous," said Christine McCarthy, executive director of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, who added that "she was probably one of the most loved teachers on the Cape. People came from all over the country to study with her."

Kim Kettler, president of the board at the Truro Center for the Arts, first took a class from Ms. Johnson in the late 1980s. "She was something of a quintessential artist's artist," Kettler said. "She was someone I wanted to have in my life, to be influenced by, and learn something from."

A service will be announced for Ms. Johnson, who in addition to her nephew leaves a sister, Barbara Melcher of South Orleans.

Last year, the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod presented Ms. Johnson with a lifetime achievement award for her work as a sculptor, writer, and teacher.

"It's such a loss down here. She was such an original," said Ed Maroney, editor of The Barnstable Patriot.

“She was an artist who sculpted creations, and she also was a writer who knew the language, and knew it well,” he said. “She knew the story was not necessarily the words right in front of her, but what the words led to.”

Through her art, her life, and in walks through the dunes, Ms. Johnson led many to a purer understanding of what made the Outer Cape special.

“I think she was immensely curious. I never heard her ever say, ‘I’m blocked, I’m stuck.’ She was doing art as much as she was breathing,” said Crawford Samuelson. “And she was fun. To be out in the dunes barreling along with her was just out of this world. I would beg to go.”

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