

Knitting feeds the soul

It can be a stress reliever, a distraction from pain and a creative outlet that cultivates friendships

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRESTINA MARTINS

Karen Crouch took out her knitting needles in the hospital waiting room and worked away while her 18-month-old son was undergoing heart surgery.

David Johnson is learning to knit alongside his wife, Susan, as she works to regain her considerable abilities after a devastating stroke. If David can't fix a mistake, he shows up at the door of a friendly knitter to ask for help.

Kerry Smart brings her glow-in-the-dark knitting needles to parties where it's a conversation starter. When she was a university student, knitting helped her retain what the professor was teaching.

"The classes where I knit, I paid attention," she says.

Knitting is so much more than the creation of beautiful designs and comfortable sweaters. It's also recognized for its meditative, therapeutic qualities.

In interviews, local knitters of all ages, male and female, new and experienced, say that knitting feeds the soul and helps keep the mind agile. It can act like a mantra, a



Mary Biddulph knits among friends during a gathering of The Uptown Knit Mob at Café 22 in Waterloo.

stress reliever, a focus, a distraction from chronic pain or a life that's spinning. It's a creative outlet that can start a conversation, cultivate friendships, or allow one to sit still and listen.

"It feeds something in my soul," says knitting designer Janelle Martin.

"We are using both sides of the brain by doing something creative," says Joanne Loan-Seebach, who knit with her late mother who had dementia. "And with knitting, you have a pattern; knit one, purl two, like a mantra. And suddenly you're in the groove. It helps slow your brain and relax."

More and more, knitters or knitting groups can be found in elementary schools where knitting teaches children to pay attention; in libraries, pubs, cafes, university lecture halls, yarn shops, doctors' offices, hospital rooms and airports.

Yarn-lovers around the world are connected more than ever before with online sites such as Ravelry, a free community site and a massive database of patterns and yarns. Ravelry allows people to post and look up other knitters' patterns and keep notes about their projects.

Today there are clubs with cheeky names like "Smart-Ass Knitters/World Domina-



casalife
furniture | accessories

KITCHENER 4553 King Street East
ETOBICOKE 350 Evans Avenue
TORONTO 2532 Yonge Street

Telephone 416 922 2785
Toll Free 833 847 2785
Email shop@casalife.com
Online casalife.com





tion Club” out of Haliburton County’s hand-dyed yarn company, Indigodragonfly Studio.

And there are “knit mobs” that meet from week to week in parks, coffee shops and pubs.

“Some of us come straight after work,” knitting designer Anne Blayney says about the Uptown Knit Mob that meets in Waterloo. “We knit and eat and drink and sometimes we get rowdy,” she says with a laugh.

University students, real estate agents, accountants, technology experts and start-up employees are among the customers at Crouch’s yarn shop, called Shall We Knit?, on Willow Street in Waterloo. It’s a comfortable red-brick house with a porch for summertime knitters and a friendly Cavalier King Charles spaniel named Teddy to greet them.

Here, knitters buy hand-dyed yarns and other quality materials to add to their “stash,” look at project samples by local designers, take classes or drop in just to touch or breathe in a yarn’s “sheepy” aroma. “Some people sniff lavender. We sniff

yarn,” Crouch says with a laugh. “A lot of people come in for yarn therapy. They have a rough day and say, ‘I just want to fondle some yarns.’”

“I’m like a kid in a candy shop,” says visitor Rhonda Wadel, a Conestogo interior designer, as she fingered the yarn during a first-time visit to the shop.

“I carry my knitting with me everywhere. It’s my go-to. It’s my happy spot.”

The new generation of knitters is creative, smart and sassy, Crouch says.

“I love being a grandma, but I hate the connotation you get with (the stereotypical) ‘grandma is knitting.’ Knitting is not ‘old lady’ as much as I love old ladies,” Crouch says. “Knitting is a different world now. Younger knitters are more intrepid, more adventurous.”

Books, articles and blogs talk about the health benefits of knitting.

In April, the Craft Yarn Council launched a “Stitch Away Stress” campaign during National Stress Awareness Month to promote knitting and crocheting as a proven tool for well-being.

Stress relief and creative fulfilment are the

top benefits cited by knitters surveyed by the council.

“The repetitive action of needlework can induce a relaxed state like that associated with meditation and yoga,” reports Jane E. Brody in a 2016 New York Times article about the research of cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson, author of “The Relaxation Response.”

“Once you get beyond the initial learning curve, knitting and crocheting can lower heart rate and blood pressure and reduce blood levels of the stress hormone cortisol,” writes Brody, a knitter.

Crouch sees its benefits for members of the “techy” crowd when they’re pondering the next big question. Knitting is like showering or walking the dog. Sometimes, you’re surprised when a solution jumps out at you, she says.

“While you’re focusing on knitting, the brain is working on.”

University of Guelph cognitive neuroscientist Mark Fenske wrote about this kind of “defocused attention” in a column for the Globe and Mail.

When the brain is allowed to wander, creative thoughts and inventive problem-solving can happen, he says.

Pastimes like these “allow the outermost regions of the prefrontal cortex – those areas of the brain that help exert cognitive control – to loosen the reins and allow thought processes and neural activity not strictly related to the primary task,” Fenske wrote in his column, “Why the best ideas spring up in the shower.”

Sally Melville, a popular knitter, writer and teacher who helped start the Kitchener-Waterloo Knitters’ Guild in 1985, talks about brilliant philosopher/educator Rudolph Steiner who insisted that every six-year-old in his Waldorf schools learn to knit.

He called it the “perfect human activity” because it teaches hand-eye co-ordination, the ability to focus, math skills and spatial relationships, says Melville in her blog, sallymelvilleknits.blogspot.com.

“I would add that it teaches persistence

victoria + albert®

volcanic limestone baths



GLENBRIAR
PLUMBING SHOWPLACE

Sophisticated Design Begins at Glenbriar
262 Weber Street North, Waterloo • 519-886-2950
www.glenbriarplumbingshowplace.com

through challenges and the ability to re-examine and persist through what we think of as failures," Melville says.

Crouch, David and Susan Johnson, and Kerry Smart know all about that. So do other local knitters interviewed to see what keeps them knitting at the best of times, and at the worst of times.

Knitting gave Crouch a sense of control when her son was in surgery to correct a heart condition.

She knit something simple while she sat in the waiting room at SickKids Hospital in Toronto. She did the same thing recently when her father was in hospital, and she planned to do it again when her son, now an adult, returned for surgery to replace a valve.

Knitting is the one thing I'm in control of," Crouch says. "I can't make him better. I can make him a sweater and he will wear it.

"It just gives you something to focus on, even if it's something as mindless as counting," Crouch says. "I don't know how

people get through crises without knitting in their hands."

Every day, Crouch sees how knitting opens up a window for someone.

An elderly woman with Alzheimer's disease visited the shop, saying that she couldn't remember how to knit. "But as she's arguing with us, her hands are knitting. She was a different woman," Crouch says. "She said, 'I can do this.'

"Your hands have memory," Crouch says. "It's like that scent that brings you back."

Knitting projects cover the dining room table in the Waterloo home of Susan and David Johnson.

Susan had a stroke in 2011 when she was a fit and active 54-year-old, a tenured professor in economics at Wilfrid Laurier University with an office she loved, a good research agenda and students she enjoyed teaching.

The stroke took away her career, but it didn't take away her spirit, sense of

humour or perseverance.

When Susan returned home after a lengthy hospital stay, her occupational therapist, who also happened to be part of the K-W Weavers' and Spinners' Guild, helped re-introduce her to knitting. Susan had knit since she was young. The therapist suggested that to remember how to knit, she should teach someone else.

David was willing. He'd watched his mother knit and had tried it as a boy. "Susan taught me to knit and very, very gradually improved. It was a long, slow process and hard work," says David, also a tenured economics professor at WLU.

"I've lost a lot of my left side capability and the ability to organize things the way a knitting pattern would be organized," says Susan, 61. Her short-term memory wasn't good. "But I was fortunate because I never lost the ability to speak."

Knitting helps Susan with visual and spatial analysis and manual dexterity.

"It's also satisfying, relaxing and you feel

like you're accomplishing something," she says. "It's creative. I love fibres and colours. I have learned things I did not know before.

"I'm starting a square as part of a blanket for cancer patients. It's a very meditative activity once you get on a project as simple as a square. It's the click, click, click and you don't have to think very hard. You can zone out."

The knitting mistakes introduced them to a community of supportive knitters.

"I made a lot of mistakes," Susan says. "You forget you have a left side."

David sought help at Shall We Knit? where Crouch and others gave him a hand.

Now they have a small army of knitters made up of university colleagues, a piano teacher, a personal support worker, church members and others who are willing to help out.

"If you have a stroke that is complicated, it's a long, slow process to get your life back," David says. "All the people in the

knitting project have worked hard to give her a part of that life."

Today at their dining room table, David modifies patterns for Susan, rewriting them in a way that works for her.

"We organize knitting in projects she can do, one without me and one where we do two at the same time," David says. "We sit at the table and do it together and we say, 'Where are you in this pattern?'"

Susan perseveres in other areas of her life too. She walked with David in a two-kilometre fundraising event and she's working to get her cross-country skiing skills back. She wants to go sculling again, the couple's hobby, and supporters have helped her get into the long, narrow boat. She's helping children at her local school in a Strong Start reading program. She's re-learning how to play piano.

"I like to say I'm maximizing utility, subject to constraints. . . . It's an economics term," Susan says with a smile. "Give the best you can with what you've got."

Michael Rouse found comfort in knitting while he sat in a hospital during his partner's cancer treatment.

Rouse, 56, has knit off and on most of his life, having learned from his mother and sister. But he began knitting in earnest about 14 years ago when his partner had leukemia.

"It was wonderful to have something creative and focusing on a purpose other than that," Rouse says. "I think I was serving a good purpose by being with him and accomplishing something" with knitting.

"It was interesting because it gave other people a focus too," he says.

"Through the process of treatment, I knit a lot and I continued knitting, and after my partner, Allan, passed away, a friend gave me gorgeous sock yarn and instructions for the way she made socks. I still use it.

"It was a terrible time and a terrible loss, and two of the many things that have helped me heal, other than knitting, are the

FINALLY QUALITY SOUND FROM A PORTABLE SPEAKER...



SOUNDCAST UNLEASH YOUR AUDIO

PORTABLE SOUND GOES HIGH END

The VG7 may look humble in size, its sound however, is anything but small. It's sound you have to hear to experience.

Want to listen to music while relaxing inside on the sofa or outside on the patio? This portable speaker is built to adapt to you, not the other way around.

The VG7 frees you from restrictions with its water resistant design, extended battery life and BT ability.

Finally a speaker that doesn't compromise on sound or performance.

natural sound

645 Victoria St. N. Kitchener | (519) 744-3111 | www.naturalsound.ca



LUXURY REAL ESTATE IS OUR BUSINESS



PETER BENNINGER
REALTY, BROKERAGE

519 742 5800
508 Riverbend Dr
Kitchener, Ontario
N2K 3S2

COLDWELLBANKERLUXURY.COM

kindness I experience in the world, and my present partner, Peter, who is not only my partner in life, but also in creative pursuits.”

Rouse, a high school English and drama teacher and guidance counsellor, knits for 20 minutes in the mornings, his dog beside him, before heading to school. While he doesn't sit down to knit with the intention of solving a problem or challenge, “I notice I've thought through things,” he says.

He's pushing himself to try more difficult projects.

“It's a form of journaling. I make something and I'm happy with what I made and even the challenges if I mess up the pattern. There is something that happens when I do a new pattern of stitches. It takes some time, but it enters into body memory.”

Kerry Smart switched between pen and knitting needles when she sat in a lecture hall.

“Knitting was really helpful. It helped me focus,” says Smart, who graduated from the University of Waterloo in 2016.

“If I didn't have my knitting, I'd doodle and get distracted. Knitting helped me give the twitchy part of my mind something to do. The pros I talked to about it were positive and said, ‘I can tell you are paying attention.’”

Today, Smart, 29, works from home providing technical support for online start-ups. If there are stressful times, she takes a brief break and “I do a bit of knitting.” The repetitive movement in knitting socks, for example, is calming.

She teaches beginners at Shall We Knit? yarn shop.

Knitting projects that she doesn't have to think about are best for social occasions, she says, but she always has a more complicated piece on the go for other times when she wants a challenge.

During a visit to Newfoundland, knitting designer Janelle Martin found inspiration in the northern landscape that greeted the Vikings.

“I had images of designs flow through my head,” she says. “It was like a creative explosion of fully formed images. I had done designing up to then, but it wasn't like that.”

Needless to say, Martin is a passionate, inventive knitter. Knitting is part of her Mennonite background.

It helps provide balance for her busy job as director of marketing and fundraising in a social enterprise startup. Learning for Humanity provides affordable computer systems and digital access to more than 20,000 textbooks, training materials and other resources to schools in developing countries. It has a for-profit model in which it works with schools that can afford to pay, and a non-profit, registered charity side called Learning for Humanity Alliance.

Happily for Martin, Learning for Humanity is next door to Shall We Knit?, where she also teaches.

“Knitting keeps me sane,” says Martin before leaving for Zimbabwe recently where the company is working with World

Vision. She's bound to meet other knitters at the airport.

“It's part of how we find each other. If there's a knitter in the airport, you don't need an introduction.

“It frees up more of that creativity. I need to read a bit every day and knit a bit every day to stay a happy person. If I get cranky, they say: ‘Have you knit anything in the last couple of days?’”

Martin's niece designed a knitting pattern with her that has raised \$1,000 for Learning for Humanity. It was a way for them to grieve when Martin's mother, Janet, died. Martin also made a cashmere cowl.

“Every time I wear it, I feel like it's a hug from my mother,” she says.

Anne Blayney laughs when she describes how she taught her husband, Dan, how to knit so he wouldn't bite his nails during hockey games.

Blayney, of Kitchener, is a senior conference planner for a think-tank on interna-

tional policy in Waterloo.

“I love my work, but it has some tension and stress to it,” says Blayney, 37. She deals with former heads of state, ambassadors and occasionally members of royalty.

Knitting is her stress reliever, her way of “productive fidgeting.”

She's a past president of the Kitchener-Waterloo Knitters' Guild. As a designer, she has a Ravelry account on which her patterns are posted.

The Uptown Knit Mob has become a strong friendship group. To support and encourage each other, they sometimes make what they call “fluffing awesome” blankets.

“For the quantum physicist, we made her blanket purple,” she says. For a woman who just got her PhD and happened to love Muppets, they made a blanket with finger puppets that were buttoned into it.

“It can be wonderfully creative, technically challenging and a massive community thing,” Blayney says. “These are the strongest friendships I think I've ever had.”

Sue Frost's grandmother taught her how to knit when she was a child by giving her a big ball of orange, purple and brown yarn (it was the 1970s, she says) and hiding a charm or a dollar bill inside.

For Frost, who works in information technology at an insurance company, knitting is as natural as breathing. It's also a stress reliever when work days are crazy. “I can sit down and take it out on the knitting,” she says with a laugh.

“It's not wasted time. It's productive time.” Frost, who also owns Body Blessed, maker of all-natural bath and body products, carries knitting in her purse at all times. When her mother, a knitter, died, she appreciated that her friends were knitting in a corner at the funeral.

“Mom would have loved it.”

Joanne Loan-Seebach knit a “twiddle muff” for her elderly mother who had dementia.

It was the most unusual thing she'd

Beautifully Transformed!

The all-new 2018 Camry and Camry Hybrid is sharp, sleek, and built with superior craftsmanship that demands attention. The next generation has arrived. With all-new engines, Entune 3.0 multimedia platform, and Toyota Safety Sense P, the all-new Camry is unlike any Toyota you've ever driven.



2018 Camry SE Upgrade Shown

2018 Camry L
All in price from
\$28,232.50*
plus HST & Licensing

3121 King Street East, Kitchener
HeffnerToyota.ca | 519 748-9666



*2018 Camry L all in price from \$28,232.50 includes freight/PDI \$1,690.00, tire stewardship fee \$18.50, OMVIC fee \$10.00, air tax \$100. Other taxes, licensing fees extra. Vehicle shown is suffix BA and includes some optional equipment that is not included in the above price. Dealer may sell for less.

SCHIEDEL
CONSTRUCTION INCORPORATED



Building Relationships



INDUSTRIAL • COMMERCIAL • INSTITUTIONAL

405 Queen St.W., Cambridge, ON., N3C 1G6 TEL: 519.658.9317 WWW.SCHIEDELCONST.COM



ABOVE: Anne Blayney smiles while knitting during a gathering of The Uptown Knit Mob at Café 22 in Waterloo.

BELOW: Susan Johnson and her husband, David, knit together at the dining table in their Waterloo home as part of Susan's therapy after she suffered a stroke in 2011.



ever made – a resplendent muffler with pom-poms inside, soft and scratchy yarns, ruffles and bows – and touching it helped keep her mother busy while she was in a dentist's chair.

Recently, Loan-Seebach's mother, Mary Loan, passed away. Loan-Seebach, a registered massage therapist with her own practice, had been with her mother every step of the way through the tunnel that is dementia.

Knitting was a constant.

She knitted when she felt anxious about all the challenges of caring for a mother with dementia and starting a business about eight years ago. Loan-Seebach, who is always on the go, slows down when she sits with her knitting.

"You just keep more centred and more able to handle the day's stress," she says.

When her mother was restless, she put knitting in her hands to help calm her.

"I would give her knitting and it was tactile and soft, and she had the rhythm in terms of going back and forth," she says.

When her mother lost her vocabulary, Loan-Seebach gave her the twiddle muff and talked to her.

Knitting is a reminder of her mother, a strong woman, a former Dare Foods employee, who liked to laugh.

"I'm looking for a knitting pattern for a large wrap. I'm going to purchase the most soft and squishy yarn in Mom's favourite colour or the colour of a sunrise," she wrote in an email after her mother died April 8. Every morning, while her mother was palliative, she would describe the sunrise to her while her mother felt the sun on her face.

"Then (I'll) use her knitting needles to knit the wrap. Every time I feel under the weather or sad or just needing a hug from her, I'll have that wrap.

"That's what knitting therapy means to me. Knitting while I remember my mom." 



JOLANTA'S
european spa
& boutique



SPENDING TIME AT HOME THIS SUMMER?

VISIT US FOR A

Spacation

DISCOVER OUR PREMIUM
TREATMENTS AND BRANDS

INDEPENDENTLY INSPECTED



QUALITY ASSURED
Since 2013

Spa Packages | European Facials | Laser | Fractional | Hair Removal
Microneedling | Make-up | Injectables | Medical Peels | Skin Growth Removal
Aromatherapy and RMT Massages | Celluma LED | Microblading

Gift Certificates Available Online | www.JolantasSpa.com

519.725.9999 | 646 Erb Street West, Unit 105, Waterloo