

Thursday, November 20, 2008

Knitting knowledge

Melbourne crafters prepare for annual fair to benefit HospiceCare

By Jenn Smith

With every stitch, they're supporting lives. With every purl, they're preserving history and an art form. And with every minute spent with them, they'll spin you a yarn filled with laughter and a side of sass.

"They" call themselves the Knit Wits, a group of five crafty-minded women and a token handy man, all in their 80s and 90s, who live at EPOCH Assisted Living at Melbourne.

But what once was a pastime for this group has become a labor of love to benefit those in need.

"We got a group of knitters and wanted to put our talents to some good use," said Faith Gagnier, one of the founders of the group, and a former HospiceCare employee in New York.

On Saturday, for example, dozens and dozens of the Knit Wits' garments, blankets, embroidery work and other crafts will be available to purchase at their third annual craft fair to benefit HospiceCare.

Last year, they raised around \$2,300. This year, they're hoping for \$3,000.

During the rest of the year, when they're not furiously crossing and looping to fill orders for the other residents at Melbourne, they make an average of 15 full-

sized blankets for the Afghan Project. It's a state-wide initiative to provide personalized Afghans to every foster child in the commonwealth.

"We enjoy doing it, and it's not work. We laugh, we joke with each other. There's great camaraderie, and I wouldn't miss it for anything," said Millie Scigliano.

Each person brings their own background of skills to the Knit Wits.

Scigliano, for example, has been knitting for more than 60 years and enjoys creating sweaters and clothing for babies and small children.

Faith Nash makes a lot of hats, mittens and scarves.

Fran Kelly, 89, started with sewing and then learned to knit from a German neighbor when she was 17 years old.

Faith Gagnier does the group's crochet work and Gert Treat is the lone embroiderer.

"For a while we had a sign that read 'Knit Wits & Company.' I like being the 'and company,'" said Treat with a giggle.

Over the past few years, the group has become a sort of centerpiece of Melbourne. They work seven days a week and "364 days a year," according to Gagnier, "because we don't work the



Fran Kelly knits as part of the Knit Wits group at EPOCH at Melbourne in Pittsfield (Photo by Jenn Smith)

day of the craft fair."

The crafters set up shop in a bright windowed lounge area, with all their work on display. In a birdcage, a cockatiel named Tweety sits by looking on.

"We feed him, we talk to him, we put him to sleep. Occasionally, he gets after us if we're doing something wrong. But usually that's all we get," Scigliano said.

But for the recipients of the crafts, the work that the Knit Wits do gives them so much more.

"I think it's the idea that it's hand-made makes it that much more special," said Maria Metts, director of the life enrichment programs at Melbourne.

The ladies said they're also grateful for Metts for guiding them in their outreach work and for providing them with supplies, which they always need.

"For a while, not many people would do this kind of work. Knitting is just starting to come back," Metts said.

But whether the craft is in vogue or out of style, for the Knit Wits, everything they do and the people they do it for makes it all worthwhile.

"When I first came here," said Nash, "the first thing Faith said to me was 'Do you knit?' I thought, gee, what a greeting. But I said yes and came here to meet with them. It's the best thing in my life that I've done."

If you go ...

What: Third annual craft fair to benefit HospiceCare sponsored by EPOCH at Melbourne, an assisted living community. All proceeds go directly to HospiceCare.

When: Saturday, Nov. 22, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

Where: EPOCH at Melbourne, 140 Melbourne Road, Pittsfield.

Details: This fair offers a variety of crafts created by the Melbourne Knit Wits and local artists, along with a bake sale, raffle and food. It is free and open to the public.

Info: To learn more about the fair or to donate supplies to the Knit Wits, call (413) 499-1992.