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Campers made pillowcases to benefit the Early Learning Coalition's bedtime reading initiative. PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

STITCHING FOR OTHERS

CAMP KEEPS THE ART OF SEWING GOING

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Susan Kirkland was a bit of a late bloomer. She took ninth grade home economics as a senior in high school. Though her grandmother was a great seamstress and taught her some basic techniques, Kirkland's love of sewing didn't come into full flower until her late teens. She's been sewing ever since and she's eager to pass her love along to youngsters.

"Children used to learn in school through home economics," she explained. "But we have an entire generation who did not take home economics and they can't sew so they can't teach their children to sew."

Kirkland and her fellow members of the American Sewing Guild's local chapter want to stop that cycle. They partner with the UF/IFAS Leon County Extension Office which provides educational programs in agriculture, horticulture, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H youth development. IFAS hosts a wide variety of summer camps including an annual sewing camp.

"It's very important that we keep this going, otherwise we're going to lose an art," said Kirkland.

IFAS family and consumer sciences

extension agent, Heidi Copeland, agrees and sees lifelong benefits for children who learn how to sew. "They gain a little bit of patience, they learn dexterity, self-confidence and self-reliance. Those are really the skills that we're trying to teach."

Kirkland and other guild members work collaboratively with Copeland to create a curriculum each year with new projects to keep returning campers engaged. In addition to making personal items like pin cushions and aprons, campers also participate in community giving. This year, they made pillowcases to benefit the Early Learning Coalition's bedtime reading initiative.

"Kids made two pillowcases, one they could take home for themselves and one

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Susan Kirkland assists a camper making a garment.

Sewing

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for the community service project. They got to pick which one they wanted to give," Kirkland said. The idea of using sewing as philanthropy is something that several campers, including the Mazur sisters, already engage in.

Leah Mazur, 15, is a sewing camp veteran and has been attending since she was 8. She's made robes, pajama pants and a vest but Leah is most proud of the shirt she made because "it has a collar and sleeves. You don't think about all the different things that go into making a shirt. You think it's just sleeves and then the front and the back but there are a lot of different things you have to do."

Leah has been able to use her sewing skills in support of local organizations she cares about. "Right now, I'm volunteering at Young Actors Theatre and I'm helping with their costume department." She said sewing as community service "makes me feel good because it's something you made and you can help other people with it."

Her sister Carolyn Mazur also has a caring heart and four years of sewing camp under her belt. She has chosen to direct her creations towards furry beneficiaries. The 13-year-old explained, "I started sewing squirrel hammocks for the St. Francis Wildlife Association. It's super adorable. The hammocks mimic a nest or a tree, places where they can climb."

"You get to pick out the fabrics yourself and it's fairly easy. It's basically a square and it has two sides of fleece." The only downside, "I hate hand-sewing," Carolyn admitted, "and you have to hand-sew in the little loops of cord so it can hang from the top of the cage." That's not enough to deter her though and the satisfaction she feels when she completes a project for herself or for others, "it's amazing," she said.

Kirkland feels the same way, even after decades of sewing she still gets a thrill shopping for fabrics. She finds the process of sewing relaxes her and also offers a unique social opportunity through her membership with the American Sewing Guild. A small but active chapter, members spend a considerable amount of time on community service themselves.

"Based on the size of our chapter, we're one of the leaders as far as community service hours,"

Kirkland said proudly. This camp is part of that community service, as is the work they do for ill or premature newborns, students with intellectual disabilities, and residents of assisted living facilities.

They also contribute to area animal shelters and law enforcement units. Their contribution is staggering and they in-

vite new members to join them in giving, learning, and passing along their passion for sewing to the next generation.

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



FAR LEFT: Leah Mazur has been attending this camp since she was 8 years old.

LEFT: Zadiyah Ash shows off the apron she made during the camp. PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON