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Prayer Shawls and Yarn Circles

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"If I can teach a woman whose brain has been fried by 25 years on drugs to knit, I can certainly teach you." With those words to bolster my courage, I began my first knitting lesson. I hadn't really planned to learn to knit or crochet, but the women at my church were starting a shawl ministry and I liked all the women in the group, and thus had to learn how to knit to be a member of this start-up. My instructor was an elderly woman who had spent many years working with the female inmates at Albion prison."



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Prayer Shawls and Yarn Circles

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Before that time, I only knew of shawls as something senior citizens used to keep warm, but it turns out that shawl ministries are exploding in number across the country and around the world. Millions of women, and even some men, are gathering to string yarn together in colorful and creative ways, making gifts for people they often don’t even know. The finished product is usually presented to someone who needs support and healing, due to trauma, illness, or the stress of life changes.

In the process of making the shawls, fellowship bonds develop and are strengthened. So shawl ministry groups benefit the givers as well as the recipients. In my own groups, I have seen women bond over dealing with unruly toddlers, battling cancer, facing unemployment, and other life challenges. The knitting and crocheting keeps the hands busy while the soul is nourished by friendship, understanding, and the knowledge that someone else cares about you. At the same time, I have been privileged to present shawls to people who had lost a parent, undergone major surgery, and had a spouse enter hospice care. The gifting of a shawl provides the opportunity to share fellowship and let the recipient know that others care about them in their moment of need.

The concepts of “prayer” shawls or a shawl “ministry” makes some people think that it is tied to religion, but that is often not the case. While many shawl ministries spring up in churches, including my urban parish in Rochester’s South Wedge neighborhood, knitting is often more spiritual than religious. One stitch connects to

another and another to form something that is beautiful (except for my earliest creations!), useful (especially in Rochester winters!) and meaningful for the knitter and the recipient.

Another aspect of this fellowship is the willingness of the experienced knitters to teach even the rank beginners with a patience that Job would envy. No matter how badly I mangle a project, there are a number of women who will drop everything to help me fix the mess or soften the blow if I have to pull it out and start all over. Their reward is the joy in the finished product.

Being a knitter is a lot like being connected to Fisher: no matter where you go, no matter your age or experience, having that in common forges an instant bond. At St. John Fisher there are formal and informal groups of those who knit and crochet, who come together to complete a specific project or just for the peace and friendship that comes from sharing a craft. Getting students involved in yarn crafts allows us to broaden the way we share this experience and gives us all an opportunity to create gifts to present as part of our outreach to the community.

Anyone interested in learning to knit or crochet or to become part of a shawl ministry can contact Lauren at lvicker@sjfc.edu.

