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Mending, healing

The Sewing Machine Project stitches up clothes and lives

BY **LIZ MERFELD** NOVEMBER 2, 2017 5:00 AM



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Instructor Annette Bollig (right) shows Pao Soua (left) and Kia Xiong how to finish a pot holder.

A baby wobbles around the classroom pointing at bright blue and orange paper lanterns suspended from the ceiling. Six-year-old Brian quietly rummages through a stack of board games and books. Their mothers sit close by. Sewing machines purr. Scissors strip-strup, cleaving fabric into squares for the pot holders students will make tonight. It's the second week of class for this group of eight students at Bayview Community Center.

Instructor Annette Bollig raises her voice just enough to be heard over laughter and conversation — a blend of personal and instructional chit-chat taking place in multiple languages — and holds up some cotton batting. “Cut three of these, zig-zag them together, and then we'll stuff it into the potholder. We'll help you do all of it.”

This beginner sewing class, one of several offered by The Sewing Machine Project at community centers around Madison, is more than a tuition-free course. At the end of the six weeks, students who demonstrate proficiency in operating their machines and performing basic stitches get to take home and keep the machines they've learned on, along with a small starter sewing kit.

Students must attend all six sessions in a course and then “pay it forward” with a project to benefit the center where the class was held.

Student Kia Xiong, a non-English speaker holding a floral-patterned fabric square, brightens when Pou Soua arrives 45 minutes into the two-hour class. “I was at my son's AVID meeting,” Soua explains, referring to a college readiness program at Hamilton Middle School. She selects a fabric motif and catches up quickly while interpreting instructions into Hmong for Xiong. Bollig asks Soua, “Why don't you ask her if she wants to just sew squares together for practice?”

Founder Margaret Jankowski added classes to the organization's repertoire in 2010: "We recognized the newly arrived Bhutanese population in Madison and thought a sewing machine might be a helpful tool." Local sewing expert Steffani Lincecum began teaching them at the Catholic Multicultural Center. The next year, costumer and seamstress Rebecca Sites took over instruction and for the past seven years she has led several classes each year throughout Madison. This year she was joined by Bollig, and they will share the class load in order to expand their offerings.

Classes are open to women and men, but the student population is ultimately dictated by each community center. "When we come in, we are given a class list," Jankowski says. "We had a large Hispanic population at the Catholic Multicultural Center, and men came to that." At the Kajsiab House, a center for Hmong elders on the grounds of the Mendota Mental Health Center, it was all women.

Centers or organizations that are interested in hosting classes normally contact Jankowski through the The Sewing Machine Project's website.

Jankowski started the group in March 2005, following the devastating tsunami in Southeast Asia. She was touched by an article about “a woman who had lost her sewing machine in the storm, a machine she’d saved for years to buy, and, in losing it, she lost her means of earning an income.”

She began collecting donated sewing machines and shipped them to Sri Lanka and India to help residents rebuild their lives. Months later, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, she did it again. To date, the project has donated over 2,500 sewing machines.

The project addresses needs locally through its mending program. Volunteers repair clothes for free at sites around Madison — Goodman Community Center, the Central Library (every Thursday morning from 10 a.m.-noon), and soon the Beacon, the new day resource center, among them.

The mending program was sparked by San Francisco’s Michael Swaine, who for the past 16 years has set up a sewing machine in the Tenderloin District twice a week to mend and tailor clothing, gratis. “He really inspired us,” says Jankowski. “His mending program is just magic.”

Jankowski has most recently distributed sewing machines in New Orleans (again) and Houston. She’s also just gotten married, in Switzerland, where she married a Swiss. Their meet-cute? “He workd for Bernina International, and I used to work for Hans Sewing, which sold Bernina sewing machines.” A fitting match for a self-described “sewing machine geek.”

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