

CURRENTS

FIRE UP THE MACHINES!

A sewing revival offers a new kick for an ancient craft.

By JANICE PODSADA
Hartford Courant

HARTFORD, Conn. — When Aida Acosta first heard the growl of the machines, it scared her. But within a few months, the once-ominous whir had turned a length of flannel into a robe and three yards of blue houndstooth check into a stylish jacket for her sister.

She was now friends with her sewing machine.

Under the tutelage of Margrete Olsen, a professional seamstress, Acosta and other class members at Loaves and Fishes Ministries, a Hartford, Conn., nonprofit group which offers services for families in need, have learned to stitch a seam, install a zipper, read a paper pattern and make alterations.

A wide range of fabrics, including ethnic prints, and easy-to-apply underpinnings, such as iron-on interfacing (the stuff that makes a collar or placket hang just right) along with the availability of sewing machines for every budget has made sewing more accessible than ever. Visions of making a quilt for baby, hoodies for the twins or even a one-of-a-kind creation that might wow Heidi Klum of "Project Runway," have spurred many consumers to try their hand at sewing.

"Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts has boosted its class offerings," said Courtney Talkington, the company's manager of education.

"Sewing classes are our most popular offerings. To accommodate the growing popularity, we offer a variety of classes at various skill levels, from basic skills to more involved pattern-based classes. We have seen double digit increases of enrollment in our sewing classes, primarily in the Sewing 101 classes," Talkington said.

"We're hearing from younger sewers — young old, male, female," said Deana Tierney May, editor of Threads magazine, published by Taunton Press in Newtown, Conn.

Threadsmagazine.com had its highest traffic month in January with more than 1 million page views. Traffic at the site is up 28 percent as of January, year over year. To meet the increased demand from a new generation of sewers, Taunton recently launched a magazine aimed at younger sewers and beginning sewers called SewStylish (www.besewstylish.com).

Two years ago, Threads launched the "Teach Yourself to Sew" DVD series. The series' second season came out last Fall and season three debuts this fall, May said.

"Project Runway," the popular Lifetime television show, has



Michael McAndrews/Hartford Courant

Aida Acosta, of Hartford, Conn., uses a sewing machine to work on a cape she is making.

sparked renewed interest in sewing, May said.

"Making your own clothes wasn't a cool thing to do for a while," said Tierney. "When 'Project Runway' appeared, it opened up people's eyes to possibilities."

Interest in home sewing has risen in recent years. Knowing how to hem a skirt or a pair of jeans can save on tailoring costs.

"Mass market and off-the-rack clothing is made to one body type and height," said Tierney. "Everybody has variations and fitting is a big factor."

Sewing your own allows you to craft a quality garment that fits fabulously, May said.

Sewing machines, including the familiar Singer and Brother brands, are available at discount stores and discount clubs for \$100 or less. More elaborate sewing machines with 150 types of stitches or more, including quilting and embroidery, typically sell for \$300 or more.

There's just one hitch: Once you buy a machine, you have to take it out of the box.

"Some of the women I teach bought their machine 10 years ago and have never taken it out of the box," said Nightwing Whitehead, who teaches beginning-

sewing courses through West Hartford Continuing Education program (www.whlifelearn.org).

Whitehead requires students to bring their sewing machine to class.

The rest of the session is usually spent learning how to thread it.

Olsen, who also teaches sewing classes through the continuing education program, said 90 percent of problems experienced by beginning sewers is because "they haven't threaded the machine right." Master that and you've eliminated a major roadblock.

And here's the other secret: Learning to sew doesn't have to be painful. You can learn as much or as little as you choose. Whether you simply want to learn to hem a pair of jeans, make pillows, copy couture dresses or get a job providing full-service alterations for stores such as Nordstrom or David's Bridal, there's a local sewing group or class to match your aspirations, Olsen said.

"I had one man who just wanted to make a pair of Madras pants to go to Florida," said Olsen. "Another man wanted to be able to hem his jeans — once

he learned that, he stopped coming to class."

"I'm done; I've learned what I wanted," he told Olsen.

Yet another pair of women wanted only to learn to make doll's clothing for antique porcelain dolls. "They came to our ASG group for four years, and that's all they did," Olden said. Others want to learn how to make a ready-made garment fit.

In the long run, sewing your own can really pay off.

"You can build a dress that you'll be able to wear for 10 years and that fits you!" Olsen said.

Or you can just stick to the basics, like learning to hem.

In 2009, the depths of the recession, Olsen and other members of the American Sewing Guild, which has 25,000 members nationwide, sponsored a series of sewing classes focused on repairs — sewing on a button, mending a tear, hemming pants — at local libraries.

"We expected we'd get two or three people," said Olsen, of West Hartford. "Instead, we got a huge number of people who wanted the classes."

Acosta, who started sewing just three months ago, is tackling her third project, a hooded cape

in a blue woven plaid. Family members are thrilled.

"My mom says now she can buy any pants pattern, and I can sew it," Acosta said.

What you need to know to become a sewing star:

Classes

Check the schedule at your local Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft Stores, many of which offer Basic Sewing or instruction in simple garment construction or quilting. For listings, go to www.joann.com select store locator and check the "classes" box.

Or check out courses at through the local continuing education programs.

Visit Threads magazine at www.threadsmagazine.com.

Neighborhood groups

The American Sewing Guild, a nonprofit group, sponsors neighborhood groups, that typically meet once a month. Meetings are open to everyone, free, and it's not necessary to join to attend.

"Come and play!" said Margrete Olsen, a professional seamstress who teaches classes through the West Hartford Continuing Education and at Loaves and Fishes Ministries in Hartford.

To find a group, go to www.asg.org.

Sewing machines

"Buying a sewing machine is more intimate than choosing a doctor," said Olsen. "When I teach sewing I try to get people to use better machines."

Good machines start at about \$300. While you can pick up a \$70 machine at many discount stores, the difference in the quality of the parts and the quality of the stitch is considerable, said Olsen.

If you're on a budget, but want a good quality machine, consider buying a used machine.

Just for fun

Want to try your hand at making a dress form using duct tape? Go to: <http://bit.ly/AdjD5r>.

Teeth

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and pediatrician agreed, carries the added benefit of exposing children's teeth to flouride, a cavity-fighting ingredient in toothpaste, which is added to public drinking water sources in the United States.

"Flouride in the water has been shown to be one of the most inexpensive and effective public health measures ever," Groeltz said. Flouridated bottled water also is available for families who don't drink tap water.

Generally, Mathews and Groeltz said, they want to see children soon after their first birthday, or upon the eruption of their first tooth. At that age, Mathews said, dentists look primarily for risk factors that could cause problems down the line as more teeth emerge. Use of flouride toothpastes after age 2, regular brushing — twice or three times a day, especially before bed, Groeltz said — and flossing once the teeth start making contact with each other are important preventive measures, too.

Starting early, she said, helps make children comfortable with tooth cleaning, and more like to cooperate with it. Children who get good preventive care, Groeltz said, are at lowest risk for tooth decay. Parents who are engaged in that care are vital, she said.

"The patients that I see regularly have parents that are aware of good oral hygiene and dietary habits," said Groeltz, who does not have privileges at GRMC and thus does not do procedures outside the office.

When she sees a more complex case, she said, the work is divided over several visits. A child who is unable to cooperate with in-office treatment is referred to a dentist who is able to perform procedures in a hospital setting with general anesthesia.

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Amy Groeltz,
dentist

Doctors' role

Mathews said vigilance by pediatricians and family physicians is vital because parents who don't bring their child to a dentist frequently do go for checkups or due to illness.

Daws said dental health is part of an ever-expanding list of concerns pediatricians try to address with patients and their parents alike.

"It's pretty much become routine," he said.

Often, poor dental health is an indicator of a child's general health, too, Daws said. And just like other issues they look out for in exams, he said, the goal with monitoring dental health is prevention, because it is easier and less costly to prevent a problem than to fix it later.

Groeltz agreed. Dental insurance helps get families in the door, and coverage is available for people with little income through Medicaid and state-

programs like Hawk-I. Even without insurance, the cost of a visit every six months can more than pay for itself.

"Dental disease gets more severe and expensive with time," Groeltz said.

One red flag pediatricians and dentists look for is a type of tooth decay referred to as "baby bottle caries," which are spots on teeth where the enamel is being worn away when babies are put to bed with a bottle and fall asleep with it in their mouths, washing their upper teeth in "sugar water," Daws said.

Parents are discouraged from putting their children to bed with a bottle, but if they feel they must, they are urged to fill the bottle with water instead of juice, milk or any kind of sugary drink.

Over time, teeth left in those sugary baths can wear away to nothing, Mathews said.

Pediatricians also have taken up dentists' call to see children at age 1 or after eruption of the first tooth, Daws said. And to start making a habit of cleaning babies' mouths and teeth from an early age.

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