

knitting behind BARS

Betty Christiansen

If you walked into Donna Brugge's crocheting class blindfolded, you might easily mistake it for the kind that's routinely held in yarn shops or community-ed classrooms. "Now remember," she announces, "everybody's going to stitch at their own tension." Then her voice lowers as she gives someone advice, "Every odd row is a right side, see?"—and someone else praise: "You *sure* you never crocheted before?" "No, *ma'am*," a male voice draws, with a laugh. Open your eyes, and you'll see the speaker is a young man with buzzed hair and thick forearms, clad in prison greens and blushing through a deep suntan.

Around metal tables in the cramped recreation room of the Jackson Correctional Institution, a medium-security male prison in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, sit a dozen men—all shapes and sizes, races and ages—dressed in identical greens and going through similar motions. At one table, a brawny man with tattooed arms delicately loops red yarn around his pinkie and a plastic hook. Next to him sits an imposing fellow with a long ponytail and thick eyebrows, so focused on his work he scowls. Except for recreation leader Brugge's encouragements, it's dead quiet—the concentration is almost palpable. "Damn," mutters inmate Brian Antonissen across the room, and inmate Russell Otto, whose mother taught him to crochet thirty-five years ago, comes to his rescue.

"You're doing fine," he says, "You've just got to relax."

"I thought this was going to be easy," Antonissen complains. "This is rocket science, man!"

The inmates at JCI, like men and women in prisons across the

country, are a mixed lot. They may be check forgers, drug dealers, sex offenders, murderers, or prostitutes. But they're also college graduates, school teachers, business owners, musicians, or parents. Some have made crime a way of life; many simply made one bad choice. All are paying the consequences, from a few months in a county jail to life without parole in a high-security prison. All have a lot of time on their hands, and time and hands, administrators at certain prisons across the country are discovering, can be used in a manner that benefits both prisoners and their surrounding communities—and, possibly, society at large.

In enlightened correctional facilities across the country, convicted criminals are taking on the gentle pursuits of knitting and crocheting. With donated yarn and tools, usually plastic needles and hooks that must be checked out and accounted for at all times, they make hats, baby blankets, scarves, and stuffed animals. Their finished projects—rough beginners' attempts as well as carefully constructed works of art—are used to warm and soothe the neediest in the very communities whose laws they have broken.

Cellblock Charity

At JCI the tables in the recreation room are scattered with skeins of acrylic yarn and impressive projects—from thick sweaters and hats to a crocheted checkerboard complete with checkers, a design that Russell Otto adapted to double as a child's blanket. Today the men are working on scarves that, like the sweaters and hats, will be given to a local charity called Project Christmas, which distributes



Left: Russell Otto gives some crochet pointers to Brian Antonissen. In the foreground is Russell's child's blanket made to look like a checkerboard, complete with crocheted checkers. Right: John Martin and Adam Caraballo start work on crocheted scarves.

the garments to underprivileged families in Jackson County. The checkerboard and other blankets will go to the local chapter of Project Linus, which ensures that children in difficult situations receive “security blankets” to comfort and help them through.

Over the past year, JCI inmates have knitted and crocheted about one hundred blankets, forty lap robes, two large boxes of scarves, and at least twenty hats and mitten pairs. And these guys are not the exception. Male inmates at the Redgranite Correctional Institution in Redgranite, Wisconsin, routinely stitch and donate 150–200 blankets, stuffed animals, scarves, hats, and mittens per month for children’s charities, including the Hands of Hope Orphanage in Botosani, Romania. Inmates at the Indiana Women’s Prison in Indianapolis spin, weave, knit, and crochet items for children they have never met, all the while trusting that someone is investing the same kind of love and care in their own families. Tough teenage boys at the Preston Youth Correctional Facility in Ione, California, stitch tiny clothing for babies in the Sacramento area through Newborns in Need. And elderly folks at the Vista Care Hospice in Dallas, Texas, benefit from the lap robes crocheted by inmates at the Federal Medical Center, Carswell in Ft. Worth.

For someone with little exposure to prisoners and prison life, the image of inmates investing enormous amounts of time and care in items for children, the elderly, the poor, and the homeless

is a tough one to conjure. But many stereotypes of prisoners are wrong, asserts Captain Julia Dunaway, chief social worker at Carswell. “You don’t think people in prison will care about the welfare of someone else,” she says, “But give them the opportunity, and you’ll be amazed at what they’ll do. I think it even surprises the prisoners. When they’re given something positive to do, they fall in love with the feeling they get from helping others.” Indeed, it’s not unusual for the prisoner’s skepticism—even reluctance—to give way in the face of accomplishment.

“It feels good to give something to needy kids,” says JCI inmate Remijio Sanchez. “My family were migrant workers. I know what it’s like to go without.”

“I grew up on welfare and didn’t have much as a kid,” Brian Antonissen adds, looking up from the pink-and-blue scarf he’s struggling over. “If I do this, maybe someone else won’t have to freeze this winter.”

Taking Away and Giving Back

“We call it ‘restorative justice,’” says Sandy Hand, a recreation therapist at the Minnesota Correctional Facility–Shakopee, which houses women offenders at all levels of security. “Our program”—in which incarcerated women assemble dolls and knit doll blankets for TLC Toys, a local charity that distributes them to crisis nurseries and homeless shelters—“helps the inmates deal with their crimes and contribute to the community they’ve hurt. And the women are glad to do work for kids; they can relate to children who never got anything for Christmas.” And while in some prisons inmates are allowed to purchase materials to make items for family members or even themselves, in many prisons knitting and crocheting are regarded as activities for serving

anonymous others, rather than one’s self.

In some facilities, needlecraft programs are part of a prisoner’s sentence. They’re required not only as a form of community service and “giving back,” but because it’s hoped that getting together to make things with their hands will help inmates develop skills beyond needle finesse. At Limon Correctional Facility, which houses the toughest male prison population in Colorado, crocheting, machine knitting, and quilting have a home in Therapeutic Community, a court-mandated program designed to help inmates develop patience, anger-management, and other social skills as they create stuffed animals that local police give to children in traumatic situations.

“This work is rehabilitative,” says John Martin, a knitter-crocheter inmate at JCI. “It makes you use your head, and it relaxes you.” Seated beside him, Adam Caraballo breaks his concentration to grumble, “I don’t have much patience.” Does crocheting help him? “I hope so,” he says.

Other benefits of the knitting and crocheting programs run deeper, and may be harder to spot if you’re not directly involved with the inmates. “Many women here have never accomplished a lot,” says Sandy Hand of the inmates at Shakopee. “Now they can experience pride and joy. Imperfection doesn’t matter. There’s such a sense of accomplishment simply in completing something.”

“Anytime you create something yourself, it’s a wonder, a real ego-builder,” says Ron Holmes, recreation leader at Redgranite Correctional Facility. “Once these guys start knitting, they can’t do enough.” Such testimony gives voice to something that handcrafters have understood for generations; being able to make things gives one a sense of power, of creative accomplishment that, once tapped, can be transformative.

“These are no-nonsense, hardened guys,” says Skip LaBarge of the inmates he supervises in the Therapeutic Community at Limon, where male offenders, some built like trucks with tattoos over ninety percent of their bodies, are serving ten years to multiple life sentences under maximum security. Still, they possess remarkable ingenuity; the animals they machine-knit and crochet, like most of the items the inmates create, are not made from patterns, but by canny thinking. “You ain’t seen nothin’,” LaBarge says, “until a guy doing 800 years comes up to you all proud and bustin’ because he just crocheted his first cow.”

Healing Communities

While there’s no hard evidence to prove that knitting alone can convert criminals into law-abiding, community-serving citizens, handcraft programs do make an impact, both inside and outside prison walls. “The people in these knitting classes will be back in our neighborhoods in a short time,” says Bernie Sullivan, public information officer for the Bristol County sheriff’s office, about the knitting program at the Dartmouth House of Corrections, a women’s facility in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. “What they will need most is a sense of self-worth. We’re trying to help them believe in themselves, learn some skills, and pick up their responsibilities.”



Jeffrey Noggle counts stitches.

“The biggest thing these guys learn is how to interact with each other, respecting each other’s qualities and uniqueness,” says Redgranite’s Ron Holmes. “The work also gives them a taste of ‘normal’ life. While they stitch they talk about daily events, get a little bit of freedom, build camaraderie.”

“It’s a peaceful time to get away,” adds Sandy Hand, “to talk about your kids instead of institution stuff, to just socialize.” Volunteer Marilynn Spurgeon, who teaches spinning to inmates at the Indiana Women’s Prison, agrees. “Women need women,” she says, pointing out that the prisoners she works with are just like spinners and knitters anywhere. “They need a community . . . to gather in quiet company, laugh and tell stories, and reflect on mistakes they’ve made.”

Changing Perceptions, Inside and Out


Although it takes some effort to imagine a stereotyped hardened criminal engaged in an equally stereotyped granny-in-the-rocking-chair activity like knitting, the fact remains that many prisoners find themselves drawn to needlework, especially as a charitable activity.

“Other inmates tease you,” admits JCI’s Jeffrey Noggle. “But once they learn it’s for children who don’t have warm stuff to wear, it’s all okay.”

“My cellmate called me an old lady,” says Adam Carballo. “But after watching me for four hours, he asked me to teach him, too.” And often, it is the inmates who pass these crafts to each other—men and women who learned from mothers and grandmothers and, despite the unfortunate turns in their lives, kept knitting or crocheting. Their persistence, through thick and thin, is paying off. “I’m looking forward to putting a lot of smiles on parents and kids,” says JCI inmate Juan Guzman. The caring that goes into the creation of each item is apparent in the smallest of gestures; upon receipt of donated yarn, the JCI inmates sort it carefully, making sure the colors children love most are saved for the Project Linus blankets.

The generosity of prison handcrafters makes a difference in other ways as well. The more goods that local charities receive from them, the more people’s perceptions of men and women behind bars begin to shift. “When we first started this program,” says Ron Holmes, “there were charities that wouldn’t accept our donations because they were made by prisoners. But when they saw who *was* accepting these donations, and what beautiful things they got, they changed their minds. As one of our inmates likes to say, not everyone here is a thug.”

In the quiet of the recreation room at the Jackson Correctional Institute, the inmates are considering other benefits of knitting and crocheting as they count chain stitches and ply their plastic hooks. “It does make the time go by,” David Austin points out.

“And,” adds Russell Otto, “we have nothing but time.” 
Visit www.interweave.com for a list of correctional institutions that accept donated yarn and supplies.

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