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Circular knitting machines are finicky and require careful attention and focus.

Warm feet, warm hearts

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When Kathleen Ducharme's husband, Jim, ducked out of the family's 2019 Christmas celebration and returned with a wooden crate, she wasn't sure what he was up to. When she looked inside it, she was even less sure.

"It was full of metal parts," she recalled. "He was all excited, but I was thinking, 'What the heck is this?'"

It was, Jim explained to her, an antique circular sock knitting machine, or it would be once they put it back together. The unique contraption intrigued Kathleen, a life-long crafter who'd been knitting for about a decade and was focusing her efforts at that point mostly on socks. But the Elk Rapids couple had

no idea that the 110-year-old machine would ignite in her a passion to warm the feet — and hearts — of women from a war-torn country halfway around the world.

"I just thought if she was going to make socks, it would be a novel way to do that," Jim said. "I didn't realize it was so difficult or that she would do something with it beyond a hobby."

Getting a handle on the finicky yet fascinating machine took Kathleen about five months, including two trips to Missouri to sit under the tutelage of an expert. She learned how to feed wool yarn mixed with a bit of nylon (for stability) and lycra (for stretchability) through the tension mechanism and into the cylinder's track of 60 latch-hook needles.

She studied how the hooks grabbed the yarn with each hand-cranked revolution of the cylinder, weaving it into the previous row of stitches. She watched sock tubes emerge below the machine and discovered how to create heels and toes by adjusting the number of needles per revolution. She learned to trouble-shoot and worked at perfecting her technique.

"I was so slow at first," she said. "There's a steep learning curve, and it's pretty intense. My first attempts weren't even wearable. But I started giving socks to everyone I knew. I would ask them, 'Does it fit? Do you like how it feels?' If the stitches are too tight, the sock will be stiff. If they're too loose, you'll feel the stitches."

A hundred pairs of socks or so later, Kathleen felt like she'd mastered the skills. She was hooked. By then, though, the sock drawers of friends and family were overflowing, and she needed a new market. She took her multi-colored creations to a few



These socks will warm the feet of women displaced by the war in Ukraine.

craft shows in 2021 where they were eagerly snapped up by shoppers; her very first customer bought multiple pairs, returned the next day for more, and continues to order them directly from her.

But it was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February and the images of women and children displaced by the destruction that triggered fresh fervor in Kathleen. She contributed money to refugee assistance but felt a deep and persistent desire to do more.

"I just couldn't imagine being in their shoes, being forced to flee, not knowing where you're going, no source of income, not knowing if you'll see your husband again," Kathleen said. "I wondered what I could personally do to help the people of Ukraine. I thought, 'I can knit socks,' but would it really benefit anyone?"

It seemed like the proverbial drop in a bucket until she listened to a podcast that reminded her that lots of drops of water create a powerful ocean. "So I just started," she said. "One pair became a dozen, a dozen became 50."

The first dozen pairs of socks were sent last spring to mothers of pediatric cancer patients who had been transferred to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Tennessee from bombed-out Ukrainian hospitals. "The majority of my socks are for the women," Kathleen explained. "I wanted women to feel like people were caring for them."

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Jim and Kathleen Ducharme have sent more than 200 pairs of socks to Ukrainian women displaced by the war there. Photos by Barb Mosher

Postal
Customer

PRESORT STANDARD
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
ELK RAPIDS, MI
PERMIT NO. 10

SERVING THE ELK RAPIDS ALDEN KEWADIN RAPID CITY
EASTPORT TORCH RIVER BRIDGE WILLIAMSBURG ACME AREAS

Another 75 pairs were sent with supplies from a Ukrainian congregation in Traverse City to a church in Poland that was receiving refugees from the war. And on December 4, Kathleen and Jim took 125 pairs to the Ukrainian American Archives & Museum in Hamtramck, Michigan, where they were given to relief workers who would hand-carry them into Ukraine. Kathleen received an email December 7 telling her the socks had arrived in the country and would be distributed at warming centers the next day.

“With every pair I make, I think about and pray for the women I’m making them for,” she said. “I pray the women who receive them will believe they’re worth it.”

Kathleen said she also thinks about the sock knitting machine itself and the different hands that worked it before it came into her possession. She learned that American Red Cross campaigns during World Wars I and II encouraged people to knit wool socks for soldiers suffering from trench foot and gangrene. Circular sock knitting machines were given to those who promised to knit at least 30 pairs for the war effort. Following the wars, knitters used the machines to produce socks for their own families and to earn extra income at home.

“I wish I knew the history of this particular machine, how many socks were knit on it, the number of women who have knit on it over the last 110 years,” she said. “As funny as it sounds, when it’s quiet and I get into a meditative state when I’m knitting, I can almost feel the presence of those women and the parallel between them knitting socks for soldiers then and my knitting for this war.”

While it used to take Kathleen about a week to hand knit a pair of socks, the knitting machine enables her to create a pair in two hours, plus the time it takes to transfer more than 300 yards of yarn per pair from skeins to cones, hand stitch the toes closed, wash and dry them, and then steam them to activate the lycra. Finally, she attaches to each pair a handwritten tag that includes the size and the message “Knit with love by an American friend.”

“This year I’ve knit 127,500 yards, 300 pairs of socks,” Kathleen said, adding that she hand knits baby beanies with leftover yarn that’s too short for the sock machine and sends the caps to Ukraine along with the socks.

“This war really hit home for me,” she said. “I think it was seeing the women so impacted from my perspective of having a husband and children and then seeing the images of what the people there are experiencing. I just really connected with them.”



Kathleen Ducharme turns the crank on her antique circular sock knitting machine. Photos by Barb Mosher