

Knitting is Cool @ Haines School Library

By Linda Moyer

In January 2008, the Haines Borough School District in Haines, Alaska, opened its doors to their new K-12 facility and new K-12 library. Looking to promote activities that enriched curriculum and encouraged youth and adult participation, Library Program Coordinator Linda Moyer started an afterschool knitting program for people of all ages the students named the “Nifty Knitters.” Little did she imagine that one year later more than sixty kids would be packing their knitting around and teaching one another to turn heels on socks.

Every year second-grade teacher Jeanne Kitayama teaches her students to knit with the help of adult knitters from the community. “I use it as a way to stimulate manual dexterity, brain development, and social connections,” said Kitayama. “Students also feel a lot of pride when they finish making something.” For more than seventy-five years, Waldorf schools have been teaching children to knit in the first grade. Only recently is neurological research confirming the connection between activities that require physical dexterity and pattern making to brain development.

Inspired by current brain research, Moyer wanted to take what Kitayama was teaching in the classroom a step further. “Learning new skills is important for keeping our brains flexible and creating new neural pathways, and it’s also important to learn things that require greater degrees of difficulty,” Moyer said. “I wanted students to move beyond just knitting rectangles, and I wanted to give adults the opportunity to learn new techniques. There are a lot of knitters who just keep making the same scarf or hat over and over.”

With help from volunteer Maggie Stern, “the most amazingest knitter in the world,” students are now knitting purses, hats, shrugs, shawls, pants, and designing their own Fair Isle patterns. “I can’t believe what these kids are knitting,” remarked a visiting grandmother. “Ten-year-olds making socks!”

Educators across the nation are also reporting that good things happen when you teach kids to knit, especially students that have emotional problems, problems focusing, or are dealing with autism. “The biggest thing I’ve noticed is the social networking and positive group dynamic,” shared fifth-grade teacher Jansy Hansen. “It’s been fun to watch some of the shyer students become more empowered through their knitting because they are the ones everyone turns to for help.”

Students are also teaching their families to knit and making it an activity they do together at home. “We have the best conversations,” said mom Leslie Evenden, “We just sit and talk and make beautiful things.” Other parents have reported similar experiences and have researched ways they can knit items for charity.

“I’m always amazed how a common interest brings people together,” said Moyer. “And there is nothing better than seeing the pride a young person feels when teaching an adult something new.” Ten-year-old Madeline Andriesen claims to have taught at least thirty people to knit, including her mom and some of the student teachers. “Knitting’s my thing,” she boasts with a big smile.

Nifty Knitters meets twice a week and is supported by donations of yarn and needles from the community and by the students selling their hand-knitted items at local bazaars. For more information about starting a knitting program at your library, contact Linda Moyer at lmoyer@hbsd.net.