

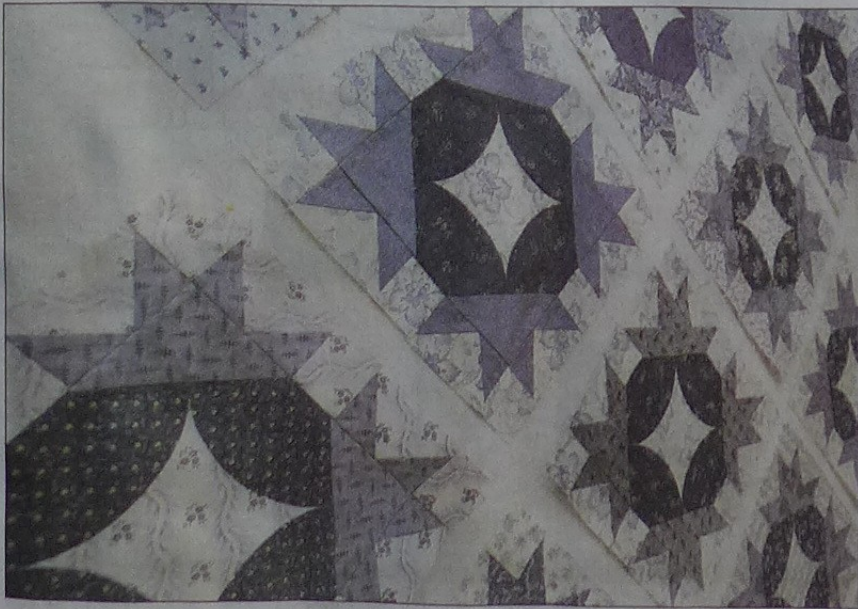


Marcus Larson/News-Register

Peggy Gelbrich shows off her Carpenter's Square quilt. It's made with two different blocks which, when combined, create the appearance of a more intricate pattern.

A PASSION FOR PIECING

Through volunteering and teaching, master quilter shares her skills with others



Marcus Larson/News-Register

Hands All Around blocks hang on Gelbrich's design wall. When she's finished enough of the muted purple and cream blocks, she will sew them together, add batting and backing, and make a quilt.

By STARLA POINTER
Of the News-Register

Peggy Gelbrich made doll clothes as a child. She learned to use a sewing machine as a student at Yamhill-Carlton High School, although she never was very good at actual clothing construction, she said.

It wasn't until she discovered quilting that she found her niche with thread and fabric. "Quilts didn't have to fit the body," she explained.

More than that, making quilts offered her a chance to use her creativity, as she selected fabrics and figured out how to piece them together into beautiful wall hangings and bed coverings. And it opened up a whole world of friendship as she met other quilters who shared the same interest and spoke the same language.

It gave her a chance to share her skills, as well.

She makes quilts as gifts. She helps with the Murder Quilt restoration at the Yamhill County Historical Society and special events such as a production of "Quilters" at Gallery Theater. And she teaches other people how to quilt.

In short, "quilting became my passion," Gelbrich said.

Gelbrich initially tried her hand at quilting in 1976, when she and her husband were living in Astoria. "It was the Bicentennial, and there was a resurgence of crafts," she recalled.

Quilting has been an American art form for centuries. In the 1800s, pioneer women gathered scraps of old clothing and sewed them together into blanket-size pieces, sandwiching layers for heat-retention and durability.

"I have great respect for our foremothers, who sewed by candlelight and still made amazing, beautiful quilts," she said. "They made quilts to keep themselves warm, but their quilts also were special to keep."

Gebrich decided to create her first quilt for her husband's cousin and his wife, who were expecting a baby. So she went looking for instructions and materials, neither of which were as plentiful as they are today.

She bought a book, one of only a few

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Marcus Larson/News-Register

With her family history quilt, featuring photos of her grandparents, in the background, Peggy Gelbrich leads a seminar about quilting at the Treasures in the Attic event at the Yamhill Valley Heritage Center.

Quilter

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available. She picked up fabric from Newberry's. She drew patterns on the cardboard sides of a cornflake box, traced them onto the fabric and cut them out with scissors.

Rotary cutters, which make precision cutting easier, had not yet been invented.

For the most part, she figured out how to put pieces together as she went along. Classes would come later.

"That first quilt was a learning experience," she said.

The results weren't perfect, but she was pleased. And she loved the process.

She has gone on to make quilts for many other relatives — her daughter and two sons, grandkids, nephews, etc.

For her recent 60th birthday, her children made a video featuring her quilts and their owners. They presented it along with a cake — iced, of course, in a quilt design.

Handmade quilts warm the recipient, she said, both physically and emotionally. And they warm the giver, too.

"I get the biggest charge out of giving quilts," she said.

Quilting has also led her to make new friends. "Wherever we've moved, there's been a community of quilters," she said.

When she and her husband, Jim, moved to Washington, she started teaching classes out of their big yellow house. That led to establish a website with the URL of www.yellowhousequilter.com.

When they relocated to Alaska, she helped start a quilting guild there. She also organized quilting events, including a show in rainy Ketchikan called "Quilting in the Rain."

In Alaska, Gelbrich quilted in her spare time, whenever she wasn't at work as an executive assistant for a construction company.

She left that job almost a decade ago, when she and her husband decided to return to Oregon. Their son, an architect, designed a home for them on her great-great-grandparents' land claim in the Moores Valley area west of Yamhill.

Since returning to the place where both she and her husband grew up, she's had more time for quilting.

She can't devote as many hours to it as she'd like. "The dog wants in; the laundry needs doing," she explained.

But she manages to find enough to quilt as both a hobby and a part-time business, as she teaches and sells designs and templates. "Helping you learn is my passion," her business cards say over her e-mail address of peggy@yellowhousequilter.com.

She will be teaching a beginning quilting class at Boersma's in November. The class will run 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. the Saturdays of Nov. 1, 8 and 15 at a cost of \$95.

She also will teach "Fancy Plates," a version of the traditional Dresden Plate design, at Sewn Lovely in

QUILTING AND GIVING

Yamhill quilting enthusiast and teacher Peggy Gelbrich volunteers weekly with Coffee Creek Quilters, who teach quilting to inmates at the Coffee Creek Correctional Center for Women at Wilsonville.

She heard about the Coffee Creek group when she moved back to Oregon a few years ago. Intrigued, she applied and went through a background check. "I was clean," she joked.

Now she joins other members of the group who go into the prison once a week. Each experienced quilter works with a small group of women, some of whom are neophyte seamstresses, others who've done some quilting before. There's a waiting list of inmates who want to participate.

During each 18-month class, students make three quilts: two to give and one to keep. In the prison class, Gelbrich said, learning to give to others is as important as learning to combine fabrics or sew a seam.

"Some make quilts for their kids or their moms," she said.

The Coffee Creek inmates get to pick out their own fabric from supplies donated by supporters. They check out scissors and rotary cutters, returning them to a secure area after class. When one finishes a quilt, she shows it off, receiving applause and cheers from the other inmates.

"The support of women for each other is so important," Gelbrich said. "The majority of our students are the nicest people. It's a really good feeling to give to them. If I can impart one little bit of wisdom..."

For Gelbrich, the prison class is just another of the things she loves about quilting.

"I've met amazing people through quilting, and it's given me amazing opportunities," she said.

For more information and a video about Coffee Creek Quilters, go to the website www.coffee-creekquilter.org.

Wilsonville on Nov. 13.

Many of Gelbrich's

quilt designs appear to be intricate. But they're not that difficult to make, she said, because they're based on one, two or a few blocks that repeat.

Her green and black Carpenter's Square quilt, for instance, is made up of two different blocks plus sashing, the fabric between blocks. The square blocks are laid out in a way that creates the appearance of an additional, diagonal pattern of tiny pieces.

Like many of her large quilts, the three layers of the Carpenter's Square — colorful pieced top, fluffy batting and plain back — were quilted together by Keith of Hawn Creek Quilting. The McMinnville woman operates a long-arm quilting machine that can handle expansive surfaces.

For small projects, Gelbrich said, she enjoys doing quilting stitches by hand or with her Bernina Quilters Edition sewing machine. But for big ones, not so much.

"It's kind of like a wrestling match," she said of moving a large quilt through the machine again and again.

However they are quilted, her finished projects look perfect. She's the first to admit that isn't really the case, though.

"I want things to be right. I shoot for perfection," she said.

She makes sure to measure and cut carefully, sew with quarter-inch seams and press each seam before moving on. She pins pieces together with two-prong pins. And she uses shortcuts to make several half-square triangles or other frequently-used pieces at a time.

"But I can't always keep ripping things out and redoing them to make them perfect," she said, "so they're not."

In addition to cutting and sewing fabric, Gelbrich enjoys designing quilts using a computer program called Electric Quilt. She often creates templates, which she has cut from heavy plastic so they can be re-used.

One of her designs is called "Irish Snail," an adaptation of traditional snail and Irish chain blocks. She used teal and black for her version of the modern-looking design.

Another quilt block she designed, "Hands All Around," looks more old-fashioned. To reinforce that impression, she's making the blocks in soft purples and creams; eventually, she said, she'll finish enough for a top big enough for a bed.

Several Hands All Around blocks hang on Gelbrich's design wall, which is covered with flannel so fabric will cling but can be easily rearranged. Also on the wall are several "Clam Shell" blocks made with bright colors and patterns that look like running watercolor paints.

Both the vivid Clam Shells and the muted Hands All Around blocks fit her personality. "I like a little of everything," she said.

Sometimes Gelbrich buys specific fabric for a new quilt, adding complementary colors and patterns. Other times she goes through what she already has. "I kind of collect fabrics," she said. "Then I'll see a pattern that just hits me, and find what's right for it."

And there's no end to what she wants to make. Like most quilters, she said, "I have a bucket list" of designs left to tackle.

"I love challenges. It's fun to try new things," she said.

In addition to the design wall, Gelbrich's sewing room contains shelves of

her quilts in all styles and colors; bed quilts, lap quilts, wall hangings. Tiny sewing machines are lined up along a high shelf, like train cars. A collection of quilted dolls and animals fills another set of shelves.

And there are ribbons in blues, purple and golds, all awards from competitions such as the Yamhill County Fair or Quilting in the Rain. She used to enter a lot of her work, she said, especially when she was active in the quilt guild in Alaska.

While the ribbons are showy, her favorite award is an intangible one.

She made a family history quilt to honor her grandparents. It includes photos on fabric of her grandparents on their wedding day and at several other points in their lives. Around the photos are the signatures of each of their eight children and nearly three dozen other descendants.

The hand-quilted piece eventually will go to the Yamhill County Historical Society, she said, since it represents a substantial piece of the history of this area.

When she entered it in the Yamhill County Fair, she overheard one of her young cousins proudly showing it to her friends. "This is MY space," the youngster said.

That was reward enough. Now, Gelbrich said, instead of pursuing more awards, "I get more charge out of making pretty quilts, sharing them and teaching."

Starla Pointer, who is convinced everyone has an interesting story to tell, has been writing the weekly "Stopping By" column since 1996. She's always looking for suggestions. Contact her at 503-687-1263 or spointer@newsregister.com.