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Ask... the Secretary of the Spinners & Handweavers guild

Karen Donde of Moorestown is secretary of the South Jersey guild of Spinners & Handweavers. The 31-year-old group is a member of the Mid-Atlantic Fiber Association but functions independently. Most of the 60 members are from Gloucester, Burlington and Camden Counties.

Question: Do all of you own your own looms and spinning wheels?

Answer: Some of us have looms, some have wheels and some have both. Our newest members may still be shopping for equipment. The guild owns a table loom that we use for demonstrations at fairs and festivals. We also rent it to members as needed.

Q: Have looms and spinning wheels changed much over the years?

A: The earliest looms date from the Neolithic/Bronze Age, with the first horizontal loom appearing in Europe about A.D. 1000. Spinning pre-dated weaving. While there have been many refinements, the basic function and design of looms and wheels haven't changed. Today, looms and wheels come in many shapes and sizes to suit a weaver's or spinner's style, needs, space constraints or budget. Usually each was developed because a weaver or spinner or mechanic figured out a better or more efficient way of making equipment do what the weaver or spinner wanted. For example, some looms are better for rugs, others for fine lines or silk. While modern equipment may have more bells, whistles and accessories, an old loom or wheel in good working condition still can be used to weave modern textiles or spin fine, consistent yarns.

Q: Do you find weaving relaxing?

A: When the loom has been warped and the weaving pattern learned, the rhythm a weaver develops stepping on the treadles, throwing the shuttle back and forth and pulling the beater toward the cloth is very relaxing. Some might even call it spiritual. At the same time it is incredibly exciting to watch the patterns emerge in the cloth as the weaving progresses. For most of us the rewards are tactile, visual, intellectual and emotional.

Q: Does your group teach others how to spin and weave?

A: Some of our members offer classes in their shops, and others teach private lessons. In fact, attracting new weavers and spinners is one of our guild's primary missions.

Q: What keeps you going as a weaver and spinner?

A: The next project. As a weaver, I am fascinated that there is always something new to learn or try. The process of how structures are designed and how they're affected by color and fiber is incredibly challenging. The variety of textiles that can be woven is infinite, and nothing is more exciting than seen a design come to life as you begin to weave.

Q: What comments do you get while demonstrating weaving and spinning?

A: My favorite is, "Look, that's how they used to make yarn and cloth in the olden days." While true, handweaving and spinning are also modern fiber arts supported by a healthy industry of equipment manufacturers, yarn and fiber mills, publishers, schools and instructors and practiced by a wide variety of artists, artisans and crafters who aren't "antiques."

Q: Do you prefer spinning or weaving?

A: Personally, I prefer weaving. I've always been a fabric person so creating finished cloth is what drives me. I've tried spinning but never very successfully. That said, I love weaving with beautiful hand-spun yarns.

Q: How do colonial spinning and weaving differ from that practiced today?

A: Certainly new equipment, tools and gadgets have made handweaving and spinning less arduous. The sweatshops that fed the early weaving industry have been replaced by modern mechanized factories. Still, many of the patterns we're weaving today have at least their roots in centuries-old patterns. But the biggest difference is probably motivation. Spinners and handweavers in colonial times *had* to weave their own rugs, blankets, linens or clothing unless they were wealthy enough to hire itinerant weavers.

Q: Where do you meet?

A: We normally meet at 7:30 p.m. the fourth Wednesday of the month at Medford Leas, a retirement community in Medford. There are speakers and frequently field trips.

Q: What upcoming event do you have to show off your craft?

A:At our Nov. 25 meeting, we will set up hands-on weaving and spinning demonstrations. We simply ask that guests be at least 14 years old for this event.

Q: Where can people get more information about the guild?

A: Call either 856-429-8604 or 856-235-4442.

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