

Knit without an Agenda

Plus Beer and Music at the Whistle Stop

If you Google "knitting club," you get a lot of obituaries. Club members were the expired little old ladies of a generation ago. There are younger ones now, knitting in groups, inspired in part by the publicized knitting habits of celebrities Julia Roberts, Madonna, even Russell Crowe.

Oprah Winfrey had a televised conversation with Roberts on July 17, 1997, that went like this:

Winfrey: "You knit, like, real things?"

Roberts: "Um-hum."

Winfrey: "Like, you don't just knit a string of..."

LOCAL EVENTS

Roberts: "I knit sweaters."

Winfrey: "Really? So, like, you knit

sweaters for yourself? Or give them away for presents?"

Roberts: "Both."

The world, at least the one consisting of those who jump when Oprah says to, was all over knitting.

Or is that fair to say? Better ask a San Diego knitter and cofounder of the Sunday-afternoon knitting group at the Whistle Stop Bar in South Park.

"Well, see, we don't even care about that [celebrity interest in knitting]," said 37-year-old Carolyn Reid.

Reid's cofounder, her friend Jennifer Hughes, is 33. Both of them are part of an increase in young knitters, often in urban centers, during the past few years. (One report cites a 400 percent increase between 1998 and 2000 among Americans under 35.)

"And it's not any kind of weird, proto-feminist thing," Reid added. "A lot of people have an agenda when they do crafty things that their parents and grandparents did" — a reference to certain campus knitting groups, ones called *Stitchin' Bitches* and the like. "It's just something we like to do."

Nor, thankfully, did Reid mention knitting as an exploration of self, as expounded in recent books, like Bernadette Murphy's *Zen and the Art of Knitting: Exploring the Links Between Knitting, Spirituality, and Creativity*; Susan Lydon's *Knitting Sutra: Craft as a Spiritual Practice*; and Deborah Bergman's *Knitting Goddess: Finding the Heart and Soul of Knitting Through Instruction, Projects, and Stories*.

Both Reid and Hughes live in the Whistle Stop neighborhood, and Reid is a regular DJ there. Reid said the knitting group began informally, with



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

just the two of them. "My friend Sam [Chammas] owns the Whistle Stop, and Jen and I used to go there on Sundays and have a beer and knit and talk." With Chammas's encouragement, they evolved the idea of expanding the group. Sometime last year, they distributed flyers, and people started showing up, mostly in their 20s and 30s. In the summer, the interest fell off. It has gained momentum again lately.

"Last time we had at least 20 people," said Reid. Male and female? "Yes, surprisingly, guys come out, too. We need, actually, to encourage more men to do it."

For the knitting sessions, Reid spins soul and funk and R&B from the '60s and '70s. And what kind of projects are people bringing to knit along to James Brown, Aretha Franklin, and Stevie Wonder?

"Most people are beginners, so they're making scarves and hats." Neither Reid nor Hughes is an expert. Each learned to knit only a year or two ago.

At the next session, the group will

inaugurate its Chemo Cap Challenge. Organizing groups to knit caps for cancer patients is not a new idea. "I used to work at the Old Globe Theatre, and the receptionist there was doing it," said Reid. "And it was funny, because she was getting, probably, 15 caps a week. There are a ton of knitters at the Globe."

Caps made by the Whistle Stop group will be mailed off by Reid to whatever charity the knitters choose. Reid herself said she has made about 20 caps in the past six months.

Knitter-friendly bar owner Chammas said his establishment is in the same spot where another bar, Bonnie Bell, used to be in the 1950s. "It became the Whistle Stop Bar in the mid-'70s and stayed that way until the mid-'80s, and then it was closed for a long time. I reopened it almost three years ago." The anniversary is in March.

The bar also hosts guest lectures, art openings, and other events that one wouldn't necessarily expect to be sponsored by a bar. "We get people who haven't been to a bar since they

were in college, and they're in their 50s and 60s now," he said. "These are the things that bring them out. I don't know if it's an age thing or a lifestyle thing, but they forget the good times you can have in a neighborhood bar, or maybe they never did."

Chammas, born in 1965, grew up in the neighborhood. Is it safe to assume he's never knitted a thing in his life? "Yes, but I'm glad my grandmother did it. She grew up in the neighborhood, too. I still have some of the old berets and afghans she knitted back in the day."

— Jeanne Schinto

"Yarn in the Afternoon" and Chemo Cap Challenge
Sunday, December 21
(and every 1st and 3rd Sunday),
2:30 p.m.–5:00 p.m.,
Whistle Stop Bar
2236 Fern Street
(30th & Juniper),
South Park
Free
619-284-6784 or
www.whistlestopbar.com

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