

CREATIVITY
and PERSONAL
GROWTH:

7 Inspiring Stories
on How Crafts Can
Change Your Life



CREATIVITY AND PERSONAL GROWTH



Creativity as expressed through crafts can be a powerful force in one's life. It has the ability to transform and bring positive change.

In fact, the stories presented here show how creative endeavors can be journeys of personal growth. Whether it's knitting to relax after a stressful day, finding a new and fulfilling profession or generously giving a crafted treasure back to the community from which it came, crafts and creativity inspire and connect us, lift our spirits and nourish our souls.

CONTENTS



STITCH BY STITCH *By Debbie Macomber*

BID ON AN HEIRLOOM *By Susie Eckstein Maude*

CULTIVATING YOUR CREATIVITY

By Jessica C. Kraft

HOOKED *By Kohl Crecelius*

QUILT FOR SOPHIE *By Rona Berg*

NEW KIDS (AND CRAFTS) ON THE BLOCK

By Jen MacNeil

THE CREATIVE DRIVE *By Alina Larson*

STITCH BY STITCH

THE BASICS OF YARN-WORK BECAME LIFE LESSONS FOR
THIS NOVELIST AND KNITTER.

By Debbie Macomber, Port Orchard, Washington

I was only 12 years old when I decided that I wanted to knit. I pestered my mother until she took me to the local yarn store, and there I bought several skeins of yarn. Following the good advice of the ladies at the store, I knit my first garment—a purple vest of worsted wool—which I gave to my mother. I was so pleased with my work, and proud. Since then I have made sweaters, scarves, afghans, blankets, caps and Christmas stockings. For years I knit only one garment a year. But when the grandchildren started arriving, well, my knitting really took off.

Knitting is relaxing, even meditative, for me. I work hard as a novelist, holed up most of the day in my office, sitting at the keyboard, then making calls, e-mailing my editor and keeping up with my blog (you can check it out at debbiemacomber.com).

Then after dinner I take out my knitting and use it to relax and unwind while my husband, Wayne, and I talk or watch TV together. I'll knit just about anywhere—at home, during flights or in the car. It should be no surprise then that knitting has also taken a central spot in some of my fiction, with a passion for knitting bringing my characters together.

Recently I was reading from the psalms, and the phrase

that leaped out at me proclaimed how God “knit me together in my mother’s womb.” That image filled me with wonder at the care our Creator takes in shaping each one of us—no lost stitches anywhere! It made me see how the things I find most important in life are also reflected in my knitting.

So along with the sweaters and caps and scarves I knit for the grandchildren, comes this advice: What’s good for knitting is good for living.

GET HOOKED. When I’m writing one of my books I get so excited I can barely wait to get to work. Same thing for my knitting from the moment I envision a project until the very last stitch. Every time I start a sweater for one of the grandkids, I can’t wait to pick up those needles. They call me Grandma Pickle (since Macomber sounds like Cucumber). When I’m finished I add little tags to the sweaters that read, “Knit with love by Grandma Pickle.” They know who made that sweater for them and they know how much they’re loved.

So do what you love and love what you do. It deserves your name on it.

FOLLOW A PATTERN. There are knitters who can sit down without a pattern and create beautiful things. Not me. I need to start out with some kind of plan. Give me a target, a goal to shoot for. If I know what I want, then I can figure out how to get there.

In my career and family life I have weekly goals and daily ones too. Once a year, usually in January, I take one day and, together with Wayne, we set goals for the year. Sometimes they’re such big goals they seem impossible to

reach—but I'll put them down. Maybe not for the end of the year, but in five years or ten.

Not long ago I was clearing out a drawer and I found a tablet that I had written on back in 1992. I had placed five impossible goals on that list. When I saw that list so many years later, I was stunned. Every single goal on that piece of paper had come to pass!

TAKE IT STITCH BY STITCH. I'm always amazed at the people I meet who have been knitting for years, yet they only knit scarves. They don't have the self-confidence to knit anything more complicated. What they don't realize is that every knitting project builds on the same basic stitches.

Most knitting is done in pieces. The project is created in stages, like building a house or writing a book. You don't have to do it all at once, but if you do a little bit every day, piece by piece, you'll be surprised at how much you can accomplish. I'm sure I don't need to point out that that's also true in many other aspects of our lives, faith especially. We get there, one stitch at a time.

DON'T WORRY OVER EVERY LOOSE THREAD. Neat, even stitches make for a well-crafted garment; stitches that are too tight look bunched up and stitches that are too loose...well, we've all seen those afghans with big holes in them where there shouldn't be any! We all make mistakes, but it's just as important to remember to continue and try again.

I remember when my daughter Jody was 12 years old and performing in a piano recital. She was shy around strangers so recitals were torturous for her. This year she was forced to go first. I watched her go up onstage and sit

down at the piano. She started her song tentatively and only a few measures into it, she made a mistake. A real clunker. She stopped. And she couldn't start again.

But at the end of the recital, when everybody had left the hall, I asked her gently if she would try again. She nodded, wiped her tears and went back onstage. She played the song perfectly! By the time she'd finished, everyone had come back into the hall, and gave her a big ovation. Making mistakes is part of getting it right.

CLICK TOGETHER. I was in an airport once, waiting to change planes, when I saw another woman at the gate, knitting. We began talking and showing each other our projects. I discovered that the pattern she was knitting was the very pattern I had lost a few weeks before. When you spend time with people, you discover just how much you need their help.

Every winter Wayne and I drive from our home in Washington state down to our winter home in Florida. If you're wondering, that's 3,323 miles. We've endured a blizzard, breakdowns and have slept in towns where the biggest thing on Main Street was the car wash.

People often ask us why we would choose to drive that far. The answer is simple: It's our one chance to be together for a whole week without any interruptions. It's amazing how much we have to discuss. Each year on that long drive from home to home we fall in love with each other all over again. It knits us together and, needless to say, gives me time to catch up on my many yarn projects!

GIVE IT AWAY. One of the joys of knitting is giving to others. What am I going to do with a hundred sweaters? I

certainly don't want to make them all for myself. I want to give them away to the people I love, or to a needy child in a cold corner of the world where a simple sweater is both a treasure and a necessity.

To be sure, the best giving comes from the heart. When my boys, Ted and Dale, were both in college, they were struggling with what to buy their grandparents for Christmas since both were short on money. That's when they heard my father mention how he used to love decorating the house with lights at Christmas. He couldn't any longer, which saddened him. That gave Ted and Dale the idea. I gave the boys some supplies, but they did all the work—two days of it. Every bush, plant and tree trunk in sight was festooned in lights. My dad beamed with pride that his was the most brilliantly lit house on the block. It was the best gift my sons could've given him.

I think about that first purple vest I made for my mother all those years ago when I was 12. I saw it a few times, but then it just went into a drawer. Well, she just died two years ago. Guess what? She still had that handmade, not-so-perfect but made-with-love worsted wool vest.

BID ON AN HEIRLOOM

THE OLD QUILT SHE BOUGHT ONLINE PROVED TO BE MUCH
MORE THAN A WINDOW ON HISTORY.

By Susie Eckstein Maude, Madison, Georgia

Quilting is a labor of love. I'm a long-time quilter myself, and signature quilts are especially fascinating to me. Popular in this country since the 1800s, they were often called friendship quilts because they were made as gifts for people who were moving away. Names and dates were stitched among the colorful cloth squares as a remembrance of family and friends who'd been left behind. These quilts were pieces of our nation's history. One day last fall I decided to try getting my hands on one and went searching online through eBay.

I found a real beauty: a delicate fan quilt, somewhat worn, but still lovely, listed by someone in Texas. I was a native Texan and had only recently moved to Georgia. "That's the clincher," I said to my husband. "That's the quilt for me." I typed in my bid. The bidding closed late at night. Walter and I stayed up to watch the computer screen as the seconds ticked down. Then, the magic words: "Congratulations! You've won!"

"Of course I did!" I told Walter. The quilt lived up to my expectations when it arrived. Touching it made me feel like I belonged to the families it had once warmed. It was 62 by 72 inches, with nine-inch blocks made of cotton dress-print material and feed sacks. It dated back to the early 1900s.

Fifty-six color-coordinated signatures were embroidered in the blocks. History, I thought to myself. I was holding a piece of the past in my hands. And then it occurred to me: not just the past. The names were of real people, some of them possibly alive today!

I'm a nut for research, so I didn't waste a minute. I went to an ancestry website and discovered that the people on my quilt could be traced not to Texas but to rural Fayette County, Tennessee. "Maybe I can find relatives through a local historical society," I said to Walter. "If there is one."

Walter was confused. "Didn't you bid on that quilt for yourself?" he wanted to know. "Didn't you believe that quilt was meant for you?"

"Oh, Walter." I'd explain later. I wrote to the chamber of commerce. Clearly the quilt wasn't mine to keep. This was an heirloom I wanted to send back home.

In a few days an amazing e-mail appeared on my computer screen, exactly where I'd first seen the signature quilt. "I'm Judy Sides," the message said. "I've lived in Fayette County all my life. Some of my family's names are on that quilt." I was overwhelmed.

Judy offered to reimburse me for the quilt, if I was willing to give it up. Willing? You bet! I carefully packed it and sent it back to Fayette County. A homecoming event was arranged at the city hall in Somerville, Tennessee, where Judy works. I'm told it was some celebration, with family and friends—and even two of the original quilters—there to welcome it. Their happiness has become my happiness. This patchwork of people's lives came to me for a reason. It was a labor of love that I was meant to send home.

CULTIVATE YOUR CREATIVITY

FOLLOW THESE 10 STEPS TO FIND
YOUR INNER CREATIVE GENIUS.

By Jessica C. Kraft, San Francisco, California

Hear the word “creative” and you probably think of artists and poets, actors and musicians—people whose life’s work is to come up with new, inventive ideas. But artistic activity is not the only venue for our imaginations. Creativity can thrive in absolutely every area of life, and new research is showing that it is often the secret ingredient that helps individuals achieve their goals, build rewarding relationships and enjoy life more.

You may not be a Picasso, Bach or Hemingway, but you can benefit from exercising some creativity. Here are 10 tips for freeing your creative spirit.

1. **THE RIGHT FRAME OF MIND.** Experiments have shown that the practice of simple relaxation and meditation techniques will increase the number of new ideas that people come up with. The key is to become relaxed and receptive yet remain alert. Let your mind wander—it’s likely to take you on a ride where you discover inspiration. Creativity coaches often tout the three B’s: the Bed, the Bathtub and the Bus, as locations where people are able to reach the relaxed state necessary for inspiration.

2. **WHAT WORKS FOR YOU?** Paying attention to the factors that have contributed to your creative moments in

the past can help you reach that state again. What time of day was it? What setting? Were you alone or with others? Was there silence or some background noise or music? If you can build a profile of your ideal creative conditions, then you can actively recreate the creative mood, instead of waiting for it to magically happen. Eric Maisel, author of several books on creativity, says that there is never a perfect time to create—“we are always caught up with distractions or our own personalities”—so “you just have to be creative in the moment.”

3. **SWITCH IT UP.** Creativity sometimes needs shifts and changes to emerge. Use the different rhythms of the day and flexible schedules to motivate it. Sitting at a desk for hours on end rarely inspires—you need to change your environment and your energy level. Writer and educator Carol Grosman of Jerusalem, Israel, says that making space for creativity is challenging and takes conscious effort: “I need to create windows of time where I am alone. Then, I need to inhabit that time; sit down and focus. Then, a sculpture can reveal itself from a slab of rock.”

4. **FIRST THINGS FIRST.** Creativity experts agree that first thing in the morning is the mind’s most fertile time, because you have just emerged from a rejuvenating period of sleep. “Do your creative enterprise first thing in the morning, even before your normal day starts, because that is when we have the most neurons still available to us,” says Maisel. Sleep is when the brain refuels itself and also processes problems and memories behind the scenes, so make sure you get enough. Scientists at the University of Luebeck in Germany discovered that if you wake someone

who is deep in REM sleep, she will be vividly dreaming. During other parts of the sleep cycle, she is thinking in her characteristic way. A mathematician will be solving math problems, a musician will be mentally replaying a piece, and a writer will be working out sentences. Immediately after you emerge from sleep, your brain is fresh from this deep thought and practice. Pay attention to your early morning musings and the residue from your dreams because they can often bring unexpected insights.

5. DAYDREAM! George Hunter, founder of the Bluestone Institute for Healing Arts, emphasizes the importance of daydreaming. “When my clients carve out time to daydream and make art, it is amazing what opportunities come their way—whether job offers, new communication in their relationships, a new adventure, or relief from chronic conditions like high blood pressure and insomnia,” he says. “With a vivid daydream, thinking becomes more productive because it gives your mind more raw materials and possibilities to work with in the same way a sculptor needs enough clay to shape.”

6. WONDER-FULL. Consistently looking for alternatives opens your mind to new possibilities. Develop the habit of always asking questions and never accepting something at face value. Whenever you can, go beyond your first thought, and wonder “What if?” or “What else?” and “How else?” If you run into a problem, pretend your usual solution isn’t available. Say your PC crashes today; how else might you get your work done? One fun way to flex your creative muscles: Take an everyday object like a teaspoon and imagine as many other ways to use it as you can.

7. RE-THINK THE FAMILIAR. Break out of your routine. Your creativity can be sparked just by having something besides “the usual” for lunch, taking a new route to work, stopping off at a different grocery store or wearing a bold new color. When you do something out of the ordinary, you move from being on autopilot to a state of heightened awareness, alertness and vitality. Novelty also builds new neural connections, keeping your brain young and healthy.

8. EVERYDAY EXPRESSIONS. You don’t have to go to extremes. Plenty of common activities help you to develop your creativity—by encouraging either innovation or a meditative state. They include playing with children, cooking, gardening, completing crosswords, and even shopping (but be careful to set clear limits on this activity!).

9. DO WHAT YOU LOVE. This is another sure way to keep the fires of innovation burning. Maisel names three ingredients for creativity: “Curiosity, desire and passion. We must get in touch with what we love,” he says. If you love cooking, you’re going to find that you’re inspired to invent new and tantalizing dishes when you spend more time in the kitchen. Any activity that fully engages you is a realm in which you are likely to be a visionary.

10. COLLABORATE. Spending time with people who are creative will certainly inspire you because creativity is learned by exposure. Vera John-Steiner, Ph.D., of the University of New Mexico and author of *Creative Collaboration*, says that creativity is fertilized by strong social networks and trusting relationships. When people get

together to bounce ideas off one another, the individual's creativity is usually magnified. The myth of the solitary genius artist is not the norm, because "creative work requires a trust in oneself that is virtually impossible to sustain alone," she observes. In your quest to cultivate your creativity, make sure to involve your friends and family and anyone else who inspires you.

HOOKED

FROM SURFING TO CROCHETING, THESE FRIENDS
TOOK THEIR NEW HOBBY GLOBAL.

By Kohl Crecelius, Seattle, Washington

My older brother Parc is athletic and outgoing. Surfing, skating, snowboarding—you name it and he’s stoked.

So when he came home from college break a few years back and I caught him crocheting a hat I wondered what was up. Was my cool brother really crocheting? “How’d you learn to do that?” I asked.

“A bunch of people are crocheting at school. You should try it; it’s fun.” I’d always thought everything my older brother did was cool. Maybe he was on to something—so I gave it a try.

Step by step Parc taught me how to make a beanie—a small brimless cap lots of surfers wear. Its interlocking stitches looked daunting. But you know what? After I battled through a few slipknots, I was hooked!

At first I was so addicted I made five beanies a day. It wasn’t long before my friends Travis Hartanov and Stewart Ramsey caught me in the act. Like Parc, we loved the outdoors. We grew up wakeboarding and surfing whenever we had the chance.

Now I was crocheting, but I wasn’t worried what they’d think. I had a feeling they’d get hooked too. “Guys, check out these sweet hats I made,” I said. “You’ve gotta try

this.” They admitted it looked cool, and were excited to learn.

Before long the three of us hung out in my basement, crocheting, churning out dozens of beanies. “What are we going to do with all these?” I asked.

“Let’s take them to school and sell them,” said Trav. Thirty orders came in the first day! Our classmates requested all types of beanies. We honed our skills and were quickly dubbed the Krochet Kids.

After graduation, the three of us went to different schools. I headed to the University of Washington and Trav and Stew to Vanguard in California. Will we keep up this crocheting thing? I wondered.

Our first year of college we crocheted now and then, but it took a back seat to classes. We decided to use our summer breaks to volunteer in different parts of the world. I traveled to the Dominican Republic to teach English and math, Trav helped an orphanage in Bali and Stew worked for a nonprofit in Uganda.

Volunteering in poverty-stricken areas opened our eyes. We came back itching to do more. Especially Stew. We met up in our hometown of Spokane. “Guys, there’s so much need outside of America,” said Stew. Trav and I agreed. “This might sound crazy,” he continued, “but I think we should teach women in Uganda to crochet.”

Uganda, Stew explained, was nearing the end of a 20-year civil war. Many women had lost husbands and were raising children alone in poverty. “There aren’t many jobs for them,” he said. “Sewing is already a competitive trade. If we teach them to crochet for a living it will give them a marketable skill that sets them apart.”

Trav and I agreed it was a great idea. We couldn't imagine how we'd make it happen, though. It was overwhelming. I know—three college kids sitting around thinking they can make an impact with crochet needles and yarn.

But the more we threw ideas around the more the pieces seemed to fit. “It just feels like something we're meant to do,” I said. We needed God's guidance to take this hobby to a new level. But still I wondered, *Can three surf-loving guys use crocheting to change lives halfway around the world?*

A few months later we secured the help of nine close friends. We drew up a business plan and filed paperwork to register Krochet Kids International (our new moniker) as a nonprofit. We hoped to teach Ugandan women to crochet beanies and pay them a wage for their work that would allow them to provide for their families' daily needs, including education.

Their products would then be sold in the U.S. and all profits would be returned to their communities. We'd raised funds by crocheting beanies like mad and selling them at churches and events. We'd also sent letters to everyone we knew.

Then one June, the 12 of us arrived in Gulu, Uganda—an area hit hard by the war. We had bags full of yarn, hooks and a lot of faith. As I made my way down the dusty streets, I was struck by both the intense poverty as well as the friendliness of the people. Everywhere we went people waved and smiled. It was awesome.

After meeting with local leaders, we went to the community center to meet six women we were to teach to

crochet. They were our test group, selected by the local organization helping us. Most were young moms. They were refugees from the war and lived in a government-protected camp. Many worked at quarries for about a dollar a day. “I can’t believe we’re here,” I told Trav. He shot me a smile.

The women sat staring at us, smiling and eager to learn, but a little puzzled at what these surfer-looking guys from the U.S. were doing hanging out in their village. Each of us was paired with a woman and a translator.

I was given Alice—a petite woman with a shy smile. “Loop the yarn,” I said. “Now pull it through the hook.” Alice was a natural. “Ber matek!” I cheered (which means “very good” in her language, Luo). Her first beanie was practically flawless. “Check this out!” I called to the guys. They were psyched. A perfect beanie on the first day!

To be honest, most of us were so choked up we had to leave the room for a minute. The other women were all-stars too. One by one they produced great-looking hats. That was all the proof we needed. This was going to work!

Today Krochet Kids International is a recognized nonprofit. We work hard to grow a cycle of empowerment and awareness. When I think back to how this all began, I’m amazed at what we’ve accomplished. These women are now able to find a way out of poverty. It’s inspiring, and I like to think we learn as much from them as they’re learning from us, about the power of humans to pull ourselves out of any situation, as long as there is hope.

And I had my answer. Surf-loving guys can change lives halfway around the world. One stitch at a time.

A QUILT FOR SOPHIE

HER MOM DIDN'T WANT TO LET GO—BUT
COLLEGE WAS RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER.

By Rona Berg, New York, New York

One night, my teenage daughter, Sophie, and I were watching a Gilmore Girls rerun. In the snappy mother-daughter TV drama, Rory, the daughter, had just been dumped by her first boyfriend. She was having a tough time. “Wallow,” advised mom Lorelai. “Let’s rent a pile of movies, call in a bunch of pizza, get back in our pajamas, and wallow.” Rory, a stoic, initially resisted, but by the end of the show, she was curled up on the couch with a tub of Ben & Jerry’s.

As the credits rolled, Sophie and I telegraphed a look to each other. “Ridiculous,” it said. “We don’t wallow.” When the going gets tough, the tough get busy. And for me, the going was about to get pretty tough. In a few months, my only child was going to college.

We had so much to be happy about. Though the application process was grueling—SATs, transcripts, essays, interviews, resume, art and photography portfolio—Sophie was headed to an Ivy League college. She’d earned several prestigious scholarships, and she was more than ready to move on to the campus experience. Wonderful things were about to happen for Sophie, but I was a wreck.

Will she be happy? I worried. Will it be a good fit? What

will it be like for my husband and me as empty nesters? I knew I had to do something to help myself cope through the summer and into the fall.

Everyone has her own style of dealing with stress. Some turn to yoga. Some go for a run. Some eat. I get crafty. It might be unexpected from a Type-A New Yorker, but I become obsessed with the quiet satisfaction of making something with my hands, the sensual pleasure of tightening my fist around a silky hank of yarn or a soft square of fabric. When time is so precious, why sew when you can buy what you need? Why knit? Why pick up a glue stick? For me, crafting fulfills a spiritual need. It calms me and makes me feel connected to generations of women before me who have soothed their souls this way. It appeals to my practical side too. Eventually, I not only feel better, I have something to show for it.

For years, every time Sophie and I went through her closet, separating what to keep and what to give away, there would be a small stack of colorful t-shirts with clever logos on the “undecided” pile. “I don’t want to get rid of these, Mom, but I know I won’t wear them anymore,” Sophie said. “No problem,” I’d reply. “I’ll hold onto them for you.” I’d squirrel them away in the back of the closet along with a towering pile of yarn, Laura Ashley fabric remnants, and vintage Japanese kimono squares. I knew they’d come in handy, someday. Just don’t ask me why or how.

Last June, I felt my hands getting fidgety. Several times, I reached into the back of the closet and took out the t-shirts. I folded them into squares, laid them out on my bed, rearranged them, and put them back, at a loss as to what to do with them.

One morning, on a visit to my publisher's office to discuss a new book project, I bumped into Megan Nicolay, a young woman who had just finished her first book, a crafts guide called *Generation T*. It was full of clever ways to recut, recast and reinvent the t-shirt. Next to Megan's chair, neatly folded, I saw a quilt made of recycled t-shirts, and it hit me.

Perfect! I would make a keepsake quilt, for Sophie's bed at college. And I'd surprise her with it when we dropped her off at school in September.

I got home and went to work right away. I centered the logos, measured and cut each square, and stitched them together in rows. The quiet, repetitive rhythm of the stitches was meditative. I felt as if I were pulling love out of those limp, dangling threads and weaving beauty into use. It refocused my energy. My fears faded into the background as I held each bit of fabric in my hands, reliving the memory behind it. Quilts tell a story, which is why I love them.

The West Side Soccer League square reminded me of freezing cold Sunday mornings on the sidelines, cheering for the team. There was a logo from the ninth-grade play, a reminder of the sets Sophie had helped to design. A tiny T from the dojo where she earned rank as a double black stripe at tae kwon do. A couple of puffins from a trip to Alaska. An Urban Outfitters' piglet pleading "Please don't eat me, I love you," a resonant message for my vegetarian daughter.

Many evenings that summer I sat in our bedroom with the door shut, stitching. I would listen for Sophie's footsteps around the corner or down the hall. I kept one ear

cocked for a knock on the door. If she needed to come in, there was no way I'd be able to hide such a massive project in a hurry.

I tried to work on the quilt when Sophie wasn't home—which turned out to be often. She was very busy with her friends. And when she was around, her door was shut more than usual, too. Occasionally, she'd pop out with a question: "Mom, where are the scissors?" Frankly, I felt a bit hurt. After all, we didn't have that much time together before it she'd be heading off to college. I was already missing her, and she hadn't even left yet! Our cat didn't like it either. He'd plant himself just outside Sophie's closed door and yowl until she'd crack it, stick out her head to look in both directions, open it a bit wider, and let him in.

As the summer wound down, my stitches grew faster, and more furious. The night before we left to take Sophie to school, I stayed up late, connecting the back panel to the front. Finally, my soft scrapbook was finished. Just in time.

I've always thought the hardest thing about being a parent is letting go. Just when you think you have a handle on one phase—patting yourself on the back, as if to say, "Hey, I can do this!"—your child enters another. And if you don't keep changing right along with her, you not only hold her back, you find yourself left behind. It's a bit of a tap dance, really—exhausting, exhilarating and the day-to-day rhythm of my life for the past 17 years.

Now it was time to launch my daughter into the world. I remember nuzzling her tiny baby feet as she lay on her changing table, with the sudden startling knowledge that nothing could ever be as sweet as this moment. But of course, it just keeps getting better. No wonder I didn't want

to let go.

After several hours' drive, we pulled into a charming bed-and-breakfast a few miles from campus. As we climbed the polished wood stairs and settled into our rooms, a wave of emotion crested over me. I tried to hold it back. But Sophie saw it in my face. She reached into her overnight bag and took out a big, beautiful red book. "I made this for you, Mom," she said. She handed it to me, and then I knew why she'd spent so much time behind closed doors that summer. Sophie had been putting together an album of photographs that documented the life of our family over the last 17 years.

The three of us huddled close on the big bed in that room and leafed through pages of pictures, many of which she'd taken. We reminisced about debate tournaments, graduation, spring break, prom. Then I couldn't help it. The wave of emotion broke. I wrapped my arms around Sophie and wept. Some of it was sadness at having to let her go. But there was joy too. When I saw what she'd done for me, I knew that our connection was more powerful than ever. We'd always be bound by the strongest of threads, the love that went into every stitch of her quilt and every photo in my album.

The next morning, we drove to Sophie's dorm and helped her settle in. My turn to surprise her. I unfurled the quilt on her bed. For a moment, she was speechless. Then she threw her arms around me. "Mom, it's beautiful," she said. My husband helped unpack a few more boxes. I stacked some books. A floor meeting was announced, for students only. Sophie walked us to the elevator. "I love you, Mom. Love you, Dad." she gave me one last hug. We

heard one of her new friends calling her down the hall.
Sophie turned. and I let her go.

NEW KIDS (AND CRAFTS) ON THE BLOCK

GIVE LITTLE HANDS—AND MINDS—A WAY
TO FUNNEL THEIR CREATIVITY.

By Jen MacNeil, New York, New York

What would you do if the kids in your neighborhood sat around on your front steps all day, aimless and bored? Chase them away? Tell them they should find something better to do? Or would you bring out a box of art supplies and let them go wild with paints, chalk and poster board? That's what Carmella Ricciardelli has been doing for her young neighbors in New Haven, Connecticut, every summer for the past 14 years.

"Kids are creative," she says. "They just need to someone to show them what to do." And Carmella is the ideal person to do it. She has a background in jewelry-making and says she's the "naturally crafty" type.

Carmella funds her program, Crafts on the Block, almost entirely out of her own pocket. She keeps her supplies in her garage and in a donated van (which the kids are occasionally allowed to paint!). The group gathers outdoors or in a community room in a police substation. The kids' projects range from furniture restoration to holiday cards. Most of their creations end up as gifts. "They get as excited about giving as they do about making. The only rule is, they can't give me anything they make," says Carmella.

Crafts on the Block serves as part of the healing process

for certain children, who have tragedy in their past. Carmella says, “They’ve lost relatives to violence, and they create a memorial for a loved one.”

For the rest of the kids, the program is a fun way to spend their summer days. Their parents appreciate it too, because it keeps them out of trouble. “The best thing is seeing the kids grow up,” Carmella says. “Some of the older ones come back just to help out.” One such “graduate” had moved to New Orleans and lost her home to Hurricane Katrina. Yet she still returned to Connecticut to lend a hand.

Whether the kids think of Carmella as a mother figure or a friend with cool toys, it’s clear they love their time with her. “They’d make things year-round if they could,” she says. “The biggest challenge is not having enough to give them.” What Carmella has already given them, though, is priceless: her commitment.

THE CREATIVE DRIVE

A WOMAN OVERCOMES SEEMINGLY INSURMOUNTABLE
OBSTACLES TO FULFILL HER DREAM
OF BECOMING AN ARTIST.

By Alina Larson, New York, New York

Some people find themselves in the rhythm of the day-to-day. Others discover their strengths only in extreme circumstances, as Jane LaFazio of San Diego did in 1998. “I was afraid of my own creativity,” Jane says. Back then, although her heart was drawn to art, she played it safe career-wise. Hard to blame her, considering what she’d been through.

Her husband, Don, suffered a brain aneurysm in 1992, leaving him unable to speak, read or write. Jane was shaken but determined. They would get through this together. She had a good, if not particularly fulfilling, job as a marketing coordinator for an architectural firm, and that became their sole financial support while Don slowly recovered.

Between her job and taking care of her husband, Jane didn’t have much time for herself. But friends talked her into taking a drawing class. It was so much fun, she signed up for a class in watercolors. Jane found something she could call her own: her art. She loved the way drawing, painting and creating made her feel—stronger, happier, more positive than ever.

Maybe that’s why she wasn’t sent reeling by the news

she got in 1998, five weeks before her first one-woman art show: Her firm was laying her off. Jane decided to look at it not as a setback but as an opportunity. She could finally pursue her art full-time.

Today, Jane's watercolors, mixed media works and art quilts are sold online, and regularly exhibited in galleries and shows, including the annual fundraiser for the Brain Injury Foundation, in which she and Don are involved. Jane now teaches art to adults and children throughout the United States. Art freed her to live a fuller life than she'd ever imagined. And she loves seeing it work its magic on other people.

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