

Guild

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for veterans and Christmas stockings and cancer turbans for hospital patients. In return for using the space at Morningside the group also helps residents with any mending, repairing everything from torn blouses to ripped pockets and loose buttons.

When they are not sewing, for others, members are learning new techniques, swapping paraphernalia, and enjoying one another's company.

"We teach each other," says former chapter president Vida Puryear, describing the monthly Fashion Focus group "show and tell."

At a typical program, a member presents an item she has made or topic she has researched, and gives the group tips on making zippers, buttonholes or pockets. Other lessons have included remaking garments, constructing "body double" mannequins, and designing odd-shaped cases for musical instruments. Ravia, who teaches belly dancing, even led a session on making costumes.

Sewing to Our Hearts' Content

The Fashion Focus group has members from across the region, including Charles City, Mechanicsville, Sandston and Glen Allen. Many women also attend evening sessions in neighborhood groups that meet in Chesterfield County, Highland Springs and Hanover County. In addition to meetings, they attend shows — such as the embroidery event taking place at Henrico's St. Matthew's Episcopal Church March 21 — and take field trips to textile shops or other



Patty Kruszevski/Henrico Citizen

The first step in the duffel bag assembly line — measuring and cutting fabric.

shows.

Twice a year, the guild sponsors a retreat at a 4-H camp in which members get together and work on projects for days at a time. "We sit and sew to our heart's content," says Ravia. "No distractions. No husbands coming in saying, 'Can you help me with this?'"

"[Some nights] we sew till 2 a.m."

Group members are also the ultimate recyclers, bringing unwanted or leftover patterns, equipment, books and fabrics to meetings to swap with others. Although some fabric for the duffel bags was bought using membership dues, much of the fabric was also donated by stores and by members.

"We call it our stash," says Ravia.

'Not That Good, But Very Enthusiastic'

Among the more experienced members of the group are Judy Sutter and Shirley Willis, who worked together in the extension service for many years and are both former teachers of home economics (now family and consumer sciences).



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Sutter, who taught at Varina and Henrico high schools, smiles as Pat Lanier approaches with a question about the proper way to fold duffel bag straps.

"Teacher teacher! Lanier entreats, teasingly.

But Ravia, who learned to sew from her grandmother, is quick to add that membership in the group is not simply for the experienced. All a prospective member needs is a desire to learn new skills.

"My grandmother taught me sewing," says Ravia. "I'm not that good, but I'm very enthusiastic. We're all compulsive in what we do, we love to sew and create things."

Noting that a friend gave her an ASG membership as a gift, Ravia adds, "It was one of my favorite gifts ever."

The chapter is always looking to increase membership, and prospective members are welcome to sit in on meetings with

different neighborhood groups before deciding whether membership is a good fit. Members note that in tough economic times, sewing enthusiasts who are unemployed as well as retired would benefit from the chance to put idle hands to work on something constructive.

Not to mention, they add, the chance to enjoy some fellowship with other sewing enthusiasts.

"It keeps us off the streets," jokes Ravia, adding, "There's a lot of camaraderie, and it's something to do for the community."

"It is," chimes in Pat Lanier, "a great group of ladies."

For details about the Central Virginia Chapter of ASG, visit asgvirginia.net/firms.com. For details about the American Sewing Guild, visit asg.org.

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