

Quilting Country



Written by **Mary Meehan**
Photography by **Karla Harman**

BARBARA HILLEGASS OF MANNS CHOICE, PA., was a latecomer to quilting. When she saw an impressive quilt on the wall of a shop several years ago, she knew that “was just what I wanted to do.” There was one problem, though: first she had to learn how to sew.

She mastered that and also learned the special techniques of quilting. She was comforted by the advice that old-timers give to beginners: “If you can’t see a mistake from a galloping horse, don’t worry about it. Just keep going.” And if you do make a mistake, Hillegass says, “you can always fix it.”

She learned her craft so well that she served a term as president of Creative Needle Quilters, a guild based in LaVale, MD. It’s just one of many quilting groups in Western Maryland, Western Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. The area also hosts colorful quilt shows and festivals, auctions and shops, as well as quilt exhibits at county fairs. There you can look for favorite patterns — “Log Cabin” and “President’s Wreath” or “Storm at Sea” and “Carolina Lily” — observing how new color combinations make old patterns as fresh as spring flowers. You can see original patterns that are enchanting in design, and sometimes stunning in their richness of color.

Many women learn quilting from their mothers, aunts, or grandmothers. But by no means all. Katharine Miller of Grantsville, MD, recalls that “I was fascinated with quilting as long as I can remember.” But she had no family members who quilted, so “I pretty much taught myself” with help from books. Now she teaches others in classes at the Four Seasons Stitchery in Grantsville. Occasionally a man takes her class, although she says that “I haven’t had a lot.” But she says many men encourage their wives in quilting and help them choose fabrics. She adds that it’s “nothing unusual for a woman to say, ‘He’s better at picking out the colors than I am.’”

Miller has done hand-piecing, but she prefers to use a sewing machine. Machine quilting goes back to the late 1800s, but is more accepted now than it used to be. Barbara Hillegass remarks that today “we want things fast; we want ‘em done. But there are still many beautiful hand-quilters out there.”

Linda Reuschlein, LaVale, MD, who chaired the biennial quilt show of the Schoolhouse Quilters’ Guild, used to view “beautiful, fine hand-quilting” as the essence of the art. But she found that judges at quilt shows “are just as impressed with beautiful machine quilting.” She didn’t understand why until she started learning to quilt by machine. “That’s tough!” she reports.

Some compare a quilt to a sandwich, since it has a pieced and/or appliquéd top, batting in the middle, and backing. Putting the layers together smoothly and with artistic stitching is a real challenge, whether done by hand

or machine. Some quilters do everything else, but then pay a professional to put it all together.

Barbara Hillegass says that having one’s quilt judged at a show is “intimidating” and “heart-wrenching” at first. She adds, though, that judging makes “you become a better person in your craft” because the judges tell you “ways to make it better.” No one is forced to compete, though, and some quilters enter their work in a show for public viewing only, with a provision that it not be judged.

Quilting guilds help both beginning and advanced quilters by providing guest speakers and demonstrations or workshops. “If you belong to a guild, you can get lots of advice,” says veteran quilter Juanita Fix of LaVale. Guilds often have group projects, too, such as making quilts for local charity raffles. “A couple of people will get together and buy the fabric, break it down into small kits,” Linda Reuschlein explains. “And those are sent home, and then you make the blocks and bring them back in.” A guild may pay one person to quilt everything together into the finished product.

The Friendsville Library Quilters, Friendsville, MD, do the final assembly themselves, quilting by hand on a frame donated by a woman in the community. They raise “about a thousand dollars a year” for the town’s library through their quilt raffle, reports group leader Marilyn Moors. One of their quilts, “Friendsville in Winter,” includes beautifully-crocheted snowflakes. It won a first prize at the 2007 Schoolhouse quilt show. Their most recent group quilt, “Butterflies of Garrett County” won a first prize at the 2009 Schoolhouse Biennial Quilt Show at the Allegany County Fairgrounds in June.

Some Amish quilters use treadle sewing machines, while others do all their work by hand. Some work together around a quilting frame. When making quilts for sale outside their community, Reuschlein reports, the Amish may use print fabrics. One of their own quilts, though, tends to be plainer. “They have somewhat more subdued colors,” she says. “And their quilting can be exquisite, and a lot of times that is by hand.”

Amish quilters understand that subdued colors in the right combination can be strikingly beautiful. So does Juanita Fix, who was honored as the “Featured Quilter” at the 2007 Schoolhouse Biennial Quilt Show. But while Fix likes muted colors, she warns that a quilt with only pastels can be “too namby-pamby.”

One of her sons, now retired, has taken up quilting with zest. “He’s an engineer,” she says, adding that “you know how precise they can be.” She wasn’t sure how he would handle a curve on his first project; “but, don’t you know, it’s perfect. Everything is perfect...and his colors are great, too.”

The Schoolhouse Quilters' Guild sponsors an unusual program called Stitchin' Time at the federal prison in Cumberland. Linda Reuschlein, Sara Heckert, and Carolyn Groves go out to the prison once a week to teach quilting. The program is limited to 15 men at a time; but it's in its 11th year, and successive groups of inmates have made over 1100 quilts. Most are donated to children in hospitals or other crisis situations, wounded soldiers, veterans, or other adults with special needs. The director of a family crisis center told Reuschlein how much the quilts mean to children. "This is something that they hang onto; it belongs to them, and they clutch it," the woman said. "And it's lasting. It's a healing thing."

For every 10 quilts he makes for donation, a man may make one for someone in his family. Inmates' mothers are deeply moved when they receive quilts from their sons. The common report from the men is: "When I talked to her on the phone, she cried. All she did was she cried."

Initially, Reuschlein was reluctant to be involved in a prison program. She was concerned about safety, and especially about inmate access to the rotary cutters used in quilting. But she says there has never been a problem and that the "men's language is never out of line," either. They show great respect for their teachers.

"When we started," Reuschlein recalls, "the prison gave us a thousand dollars. They said that 'this is all you'll ever get. You must use it for hard equipment only.' That was for four stations" (each including a sewing machine, mat, ruler, scissors, and rotary cutter). Some people have donated more equipment, though, and many donate fabrics for the program. Cash donations are used for batting, needles for the machines, and repairs.

Many inmates are in a drug recovery program, and Reuschlein reports that quilting actually "changes their

thinking patterns" in a positive way as they become involved in "designing their own things." One man, who had done upholstery work before his imprisonment, set out to learn everything he could about quilting techniques so he could add quilting to his upholstery business. His goal was the ability, with help from his sister, to design and make "a full room—and do it well." Another inmate, heading for a halfway house, planned to make quilts for donation as a community-service project. He said that would "help me to get through the goals that I need to get back home."

Early in the program, a young inmate sewed a quilt block of a rose and barbed wire. He explained that "when-ever people ride by a prison, what they see is barbed wire. And they don't realize there are some roses behind that barbed wire. And I was not a rose when I got here. But I'm gettin' there. I'm workin' on it.... I'm trying to get home, closer to my family, by doing extra things and working as hard as I can. I have a four-year-old son, and I want to be a good father to him."

Area quilting guilds include Creative Needle Quilters, LaVale, MD. (Sharon Diehl, sdiehl@umd.edu); Schoolhouse Quilters' Guild, Cumberland, MD. (www.schoolhousequilters.org); Friendsville Library Quilters, Friendsville, MD. (301-746-4057 or 301-746-5663); and Heritage Quilters, McHenry, MD. (301-387-4959). See quiltguilds.com for other groups in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. For information on quilting classes at Allegany College of Maryland, Cumberland, MD, call 301-777-1626; and for classes at Four Seasons Stitchery, Grantsville, MD, call 301-895-5958. The Fall Foliage Festival, Bedford, PA, Oct. 3-4 & 10-11, will include a quilt show and sale. So will the October 10-11 portion of the Autumn Glory Festival, Oakland, MD.

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