

Passionate quilters: It's hip to be a square

By JACKIE LUPO

Think quilting is just for grannies? Then you haven't met the Village Squares, Scarsdale's guild of quilting enthusiasts. They'll be the first to tell you that quilting is on the cutting edge.

The 15-year-old organization, which meets on the second Tuesday of each month at St. James the Less Church, has more than 100 members. Some are casual hobbyists, but many, like Village Squares' president Jeri Riggs of Dobbs Ferry, enjoy nationwide reputations as quilt artists.

Riggs, who was a psychiatrist before she was forced by illness to stop practicing, began quilting as therapy, but now does it as an all-consuming avocation.

"The Village Squares embraced me," she said of her entry into quilting. She stressed that although there are plenty of expert quilters in the Village Squares, novices are always welcome.

"It's kind of like a 12-step group," she joked. "You don't have to make quilts to come to a meeting. You just have to like them, like to see the show and tell and hear the speakers. We love to see what people are doing."

A favorite quilting genre for Riggs and other Village Squares is wearable art.

"They quilt vests and jackets and embellish them," she explained. "I've made a bunch of those. I made a crazy quilt vest out of black satins and velvets."

Even though the idea sounds totally contemporary, it's actually quite classic.

"The old tried and true is also fabulous," said Riggs. "Victorians 100 years ago were embellishing with beads and satin and beautiful ribbon and doing fancy embroidery. It's been rediscovered."

Riggs is far from alone in her passion for patchwork. She said that the value of the quilting industry has increased by over 50 percent just in the last five years.

"Now that people have more time, they want things done as an expression of themselves. It's a very comforting kind of thing to work on."

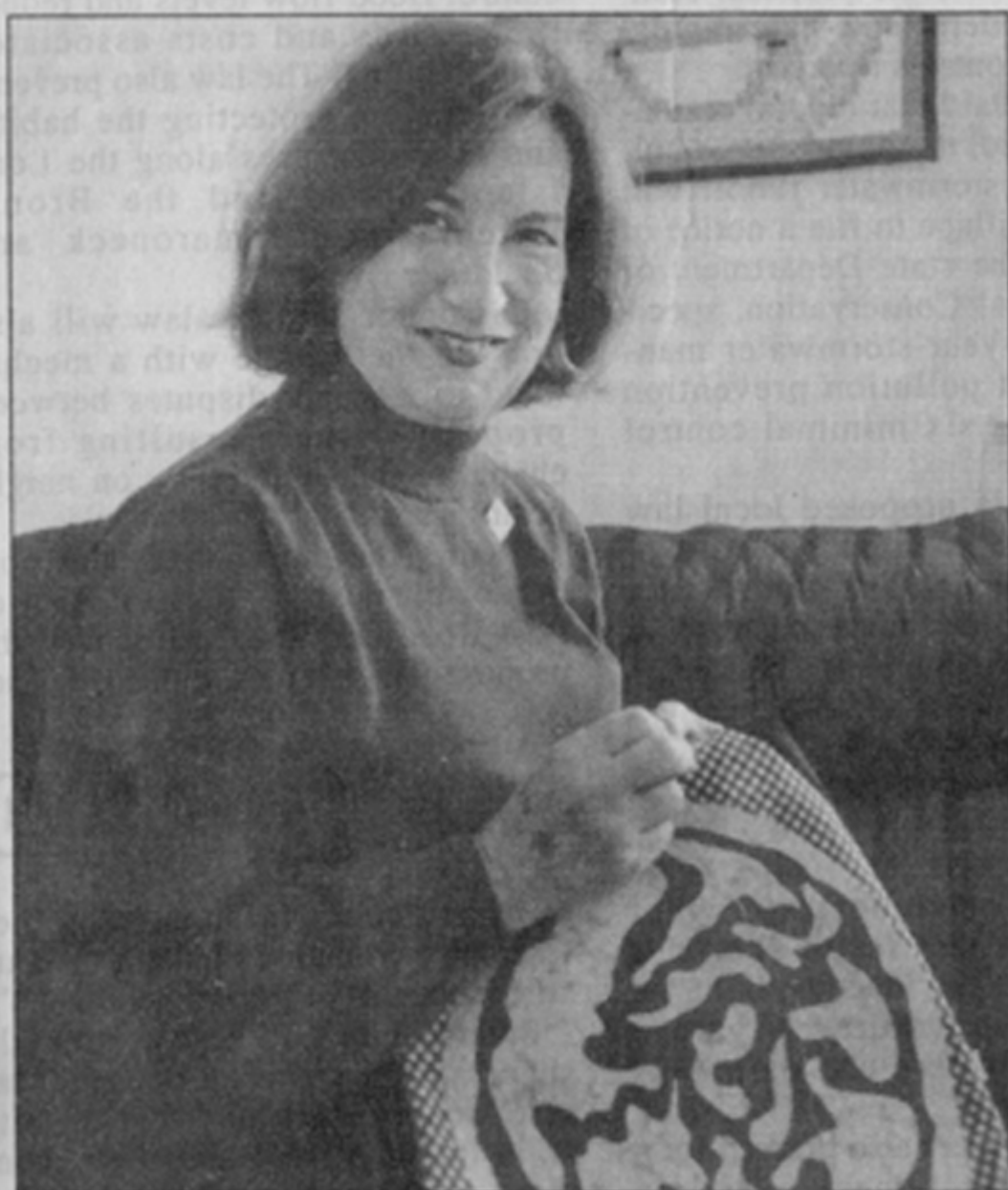
Quilting is not only comforting, it is also big business: it's the second most popular hobby after gardening. In fact, according to a quilting industry survey, almost 20 million Americans (99 percent of them women) do some quilting, and over 1 million of them are considered hard-core quilters.

Riggs said that quilts generally fall into two categories, functional and art. "Functional quilts are like bed quilts, baby quilts, quilts that you give for comfort that are used, and washed, and that match your decor. Then there are quilts that are an expression of the artistic temperament of the artist. These are quilts meant for the wall."

Riggs specializes in art quilts. "My art is about the dialogue between chaos and order," she explained. Her work is an exploration in progress, sometimes abstract, sometimes representational, sometimes geometric and disciplined, and sometimes a swirling riot of shape and color. She has exhibited at shows throughout the country, and one of her quilts, depicting the pre-9/11 New York skyline embellished with hearts, is part of a traveling exhibit to benefit families victimized by the World Trade Center disaster.

Edgemont resident Abby Shipper, a member of the Village Squares for 13 years and currently program chairman for the guild, enjoys making quilts that have personal significance. One of her early projects, in June of 1990, was actually a group effort, in which she organized a squad of volunteer quilters and stitchers to create a memory quilt in honor of Frank Calzi, who was retiring as the superintendent of Edgemont schools.

"We sent blocks out to every organization in Edgemont," she recalled. "We had



Abby Shipper working on a quilt.



A quilt by Village Squares' president Jeri Riggs

A quick quiz on quilting

True or false?

• 15 percent of all U.S. households have at least one quilter in residence.

True. But only 6 percent of those are what the industry calls "dedicated quilters," who account for 94 percent of the \$1.72 billion spent annually on quilting.

• Most serious quilters are retired.

False. The average age of "dedicated quilters" is 55.

• Quilting is an inexpensive hobby.

False. Sure, you could specialize in "memory" quilts made from bits of old fabric. But dedicated quilters own an average of \$4,543 worth of quilting supplies and have a stash of fabric worth an average of \$2,407. Five percent of dedicated quilters admit to owning over \$10,000 worth of fabric.

• You don't have to know how to sew to learn how to quilt.

True. Expertise with a sewing machine comes in handy for complicated designs. But even a 9-year-old can learn enough elementary techniques to turn out an authentic patchwork quilt. There are even "no sew" quilts put together with fusible bonding material instead of stitching.

(Statistics from a survey conducted by *Quilting Newsletter Magazine*.)

65 blocks signed; we had retired custodians coming back to sign blocks. Then the Japanese women's club set up a quilting schedule and for two weeks we had a quilting bee in my house. Even teachers would be coming over to quilt."

Since then, Shipper has created a number of memory quilts. She created a 50th birthday quilt for a friend, made entirely out of photographs transferred to fabric and stitched into a wall hanging. Another unique creation was designed as a chuppah, or wedding canopy. It had 42 memory blocks made by friends and relatives. "One of the bride's grandmothers had just died, and we put one of the messages she had written on fabric, with one of her handkerchiefs, and we also reproduced one of the grandfather's paintings on fabric. We presented that at a rehearsal dinner and they were just floored," she said.

When her daughter, Amy, was married, Shipper decided to make a "whole cloth" quilt (one that gets its pattern from the stitching rather than from patchwork) for her chuppah. "My quilting buddies helped me get it done," she said of her friends in the Village Squares. "It's been the kind of situation where people help each other."

Shipper said that some members come early to sit and stitch before the meeting, because "it's companionable to work with other people, or sometimes they need help. They need to show someone and say, why won't this fit?"

Shipper said seeing the work of other quilters is always a highlight of the Village Squares' meetings.

"Very often we have a trunk show, with someone bringing quilts they have made over a lifetime, demonstrating techniques they have developed, and sometimes showing quilts that have helped them

through great pain and sorrow."

Members also get a chance to learn about new tools, fabrics and design trends from the guest speakers who are a highlight of each meeting. At the Village Squares' next meeting on March 11, the guest will be Barbara McKie, an "experimental quilter" who is also a microbiologist as well as a stained glass and jewelry maker and a computer expert.

Computer technology is actually quite compatible with contemporary quilting. One of Shipper's most astounding creations is a 1,600-piece quilt based on a photograph of her mother that she had scanned into a computer and blown up so that each pixel was the size of a quilt square. For fabrics, she used one black, one white, and six differently patterned black and white fabrics that would represent six shades of gray. Looked at from close up, the quilt looks like just a lot of black, white and gray squares. But step back, and her mother's face comes into focus, zeroing in on what Shipper called "her famous smile and her famous eyebrows." The finished product looks as if it could hang beside the Andy Warhols and the Chuck Closes in any art museum.

Shipper said the meetings of the Village Squares start with a social hour when people bring lunch. The "formal" meeting starts at 12:30, followed by the speaker. Even though the meetings are held during the workday, this doesn't faze the career women who play hooky from their jobs on the second Tuesday of every month.

"So many people consider this an important part of their lives, they change schedules just so they can attend meetings," said Shipper. She said that making friends is at least as important as learning

new techniques for many of the members.

"There's a tremendous range in age," says Shipper. "This is the first time in my life I have had friends more than five years older or younger. I have friends who are 92 and friends who are 36, old enough to be my mother or my children. Some were attorneys, some teachers, some never worked outside the home."

Like many quilters' guilds, the Village Squares have a strong philanthropic component to their activities. "We do a lot of outreach," explains Shipper. For example, they make quilts for babies and children at shelters such as My Sisters' Place, and a number of women have gone up to the women's correctional facility in Bedford to show women who are about to have babies in prison how to quilt. The women are allowed to keep their babies with them in prison for a limited amount of time.

"Making a quilt helps reinforce the maternal bond with their children," she said. "When the baby has to leave the prison, their caretaker says to the baby, 'Your mommy made that for you.'"

Every two years the Village Squares mount a major exhibition with a raffle for charity. For their show last October, they were able to raise \$550 for the benefit of Gilda's Club in White Plains, proof that quilts can be a source of comfort in more ways than one.

"The members of our guild produce things that are not just inspiring but sometimes intimidating," said Shipper, who, like many quilters, has given away almost all her work as gifts. "It's just a wonderful feeling to know that people are ready to share. They spend incredible amounts of time and money making something ... and then they give it away."