

We're In This Together

Guilts and Groups: From Group to Guild

By Laurie Chochinov

Hand knitting has a very interesting history. Creating garments with sticks and strings began as a necessity. With the advent of knitting machines during the Industrial Revolution, reliance on hand knitting for all our warm clothing and accessories dwindled. Over time, knitting by hand slowly moved from profession to hobby.

One thing that's been consistent over the centuries has been that hand knitters enjoy being in the company of others. These could be family members, local knitting circles, faith-based groups or, in recent years, coffee aficionados. If you look around your local knitting store, coffee shop or library, you are bound to see a few hand knitters getting together. The biggest hand knitting group of all is Ravelry. At the same time, there has been an increased interest in hand knitting guilds as a place to meet and learn.

So what is the difference between a group of hand knitters and a hand knitters' guild? Let's start with definitions. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a group is "a number of people located, gathered or classed together." This means when knitters are sitting in a coffee shop they could be considered a group of coffee drinkers, a group of knitters, a group of talkers or even a group of texters. Hand knitting groups tend to be casual gatherings of people who enjoy each other's company. The location of these get-togethers may vary, depending on where space is available. The timing may change from week to week depending on the hand knitters' personal lives. Usually there is no agenda for the get-together. If someone needs help with a project, they depend on the expertise of their friends.

Guilds, on the other hand, have a different definition and therefore a different purpose. The same Oxford Dictionary defines a guild as "an association of people for mutual aid or the pursuit of a common goal." It is the pursuit of a common goal that makes a hand knitting guild different from a group of hand knitters.

The first goal of a hand knitting guild is to share knowledge for the improvement of the knitters' skills. The guilds in the 16th century had the same purpose. They required a six-year apprenticeship before a knitter could be considered for master knitter status. This enabled the apprentice to learn a craft and the techniques he would need to make a living as a knitter. Twenty-first century guilds do not require an apprenticeship, but they do provide learning opportunities through regular programs, workshops, and special events.

A second distinction between a group and a guild is the formalization of the membership. Guilds have an identified membership base and frequently will charge a membership

fee. A guild is open to all hand knitters in the community and usually is not affiliated with any organization (community centre, faith community, yarn store, etc.). Meetings are held regularly and have set agendas. The leadership of the guild normally is made up of member volunteers.

Guild membership can include other benefits. Many guilds have resource libraries available for members. Some negotiate point-of-sale discounts with local vendors. Others hold juried knitting competitions open only to members. Newsletters and websites provide information about ongoing activities in the region. Regular Show & Tell events let members learn more about knitting projects that could interest them. It is the formalization of all these activities which distinguishes a guild from a group.

So how can a group become a guild? I think the first requirement is a commitment from all participants to move beyond being a knitting circle. The goal should be to create a stand-alone organization. This means agreeing that there will be regular meetings with programming designed to improve knitting knowledge and skills. It means that membership is open to anyone with an interest in hand knitting. It means a commitment by the members to help the guild grow as a destination for local knitters interested in enhancing their skills and making new friends. Members have to accept the responsibilities of running the guild, such as organizing meetings, developing programs, finding speakers, preparing newsletters, maintaining membership lists, and developing a library. This should lead to membership growth and a self-sustaining organization.

The Knitting Guild Association (TKGA) has resources available to help groups become guilds or to support guilds looking to become bigger and more self-sustaining. Here you can find suggested programming, recommendations for organizational structure, and a set of generic By-Laws.

Some think of knitting as a solitary activity. However, my experience has been that knitters enjoy meeting, chatting, and learning with each other. While groups of hand knitters will always be part of our knitting community, there is a great deal to be gained from a hand knitting guild. I encourage all knitters to consider going from group to guild. You won't regret it.

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