

Cathy Townsley



One of the many reasons Cathy Townsley is an avid knitter is the portability of this craft. Two needles and a bag of yarn is enough to happily occupy her attention no matter where she is, turning virtually any setting into a hat making studio. Since Cathy divides her time between New Hampshire and Florida, with stops in between the seasons at her Shelburne home, it's important to her to be able to pick up and go without a lot of fuss.

For this interview, we met at the Arts Co-op. Cathy brought along what looks like a large, loosely knitted bag. This was, in fact, an un-felted hat in progress; floppy and shapeless, it was a far cry from the perky and colorful little hats that decorate the textile area at the store. Cathy related that there are bags resembling her un-felted hats like these to put infants in, called "Peapods," that are for sale at a nearby gallery.

"You need an old washer for the felting," she explained, "one with an agitator, a top-loader. Felting will destroy the filter, the mohair always escapes even though I tie them up in pillowcases." She loads her old washer with about 5 hats at a time, and stands guard over the machine during its wash cycle, checking on the shrinkage periodically and being sure to remove the hats before they get too small. "Some yarns felt faster, like the red. The yellow is slower, just because of the dye or type of yarn. It might take 15 minutes for the red, or 40 minutes for the yellow, you just have to stand there at the washer, and keep taking it out."

They can't go through the spin cycle, which will crease them, so she takes them out and dries them



on forms as in this picture.

Townsley has been knitting since she was ten years old. Her family moved around a lot (her dad was a construction engineer for the Boston & Maine railroad) before settling in Greenfield, and when she learned that the nearby Girl's Club offered free workshops in cooking, dancing, and knitting, she decided to take a class.

She put the needles aside through her teenage years, then took them up again when she became a housewife and mother. Baby clothes, blankets, and sweaters flowed from her busy hands during the 11 years she stayed at home. With seven grandchildren and now a great-grandchild on the way, she is still occupied with supplying these useful items to her family.

Her hat industry was the outgrowth of a felted hand bag workshop she took in 2002. "There's a whole richness that comes into the wool when it's felted" Townsley said. She ran across a hat pattern at one point and tried making one. It took off from there. Every place she has stocked her hats has been able to consistently sell them.

She has since engineered her own version of the rolled brim hat over the ensuing years, adding a band of metallic yarns that add shape to the form by pulling it in right before the brim. "The rolled brim hat really brings out your eyes and cheekbones compared to the floppy brim style" added Townsley.



Indeed, many people like to have three or more of her hats in different colors to go with different coats. August through October is her best season at the Shelburne Coop, with bus tours bringing a lot of customers for her wares. She estimates she has sold over a hundred hats since coming to the Coop in 2004. Recently she added some yarn necklaces to her offerings. These are strands of yarn gathered into different palettes of color and fastened through cone shaped ends that connect together. Perfect for a turtleneck shirt or dress, and an obvious complement to one of her hats!