

JVITTIEMPA

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On Fostering a Better Integration of Male Knitters into the Community

Libby Bruce, an avid knitter and owner of WonderKnit (now an internet-based store) in Clintonville, Ohio, accompanied one of her male friends to a local yarn store as he was preparing to embark on knitting his first sweater. Already an accomplished knitter, he was almost positive what he wanted and where in the store it was, but decided to bring Bruce along for a second opinion, just to be sure.

When they entered the store, one of the employees yelled out – “Man in the store!”

Both were shocked by this outburst, but continued onward so he could purchase his yarn. Once the employees finally approached the pair they immediately looked to Bruce to ask what project she was going to be purchasing supplies for – but were full of disbelief when she explained that it was her friend who would be knitting a sweater and would be doing so on his own.

Being treated as a curiosity and made to feel like your choice of hobbies is odd or not normal is not the best way to be greeted by your fellow crafters. However, some yarn shops are becoming more aware of men who knit and are making attempts to be more welcoming and doing things to keep them involved in knitting.

Joyce Lewis, owner of The Yarn Shop in Columbus, Ohio has been catering to knitters for the past 11 years but said that men only make up about 3% of her clients. She said she tries to make those men that come in to her store welcome by keeping a large selection of male friendly patterns on hand. Additionally, Lewis said that she “tries to keep both sexes in mind when buying yarn” for her shop and said she tries to avoid making purchases “based solely on what I like.”

Three of the shop owners said they have tried having men’s knitting groups at one point or another. For some shops, this was a very successful endeavor. As an example, Bruce once had up to 15 men showing up to her Clintonville shop for men’s knitting group on the third Thursday of the month. However, Jan Emerick, of Knitter’s Mercantile in Columbus, Ohio, said: “I tried to have a men’s knitting night, but it didn’t go too well. We had to disband it after about 6 months of only having one to two men showing up.”

Even though there seems to be mixed success in having a men’s only event – shop owners shouldn’t be afraid of integrating the sexes into one group. While the number of men who show up tend to be on the low side, it may be a start to helping the male knitters feel more welcome into the knitting community. According to Libby, “Everybody gets along. Some of the women appreciate being able to flirt w/ guys. Everyone has fun and gets along.”

While it is hard to give the reasons why men are reluctant to show up and keep a men’s knitting night going, many of the shop owners expressed a great deal of respect for the men who come through their stores.

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For example, Emerick spoke highly of one regular who has been knitting for only two years but has made 13 sweaters already – often involving complicated cables. Additionally, she said “I do welcome them and like having them in the store – the men are some of the best knitters, they progress more quickly and often try new things.”

Echoing this sentiment, both shop co-owner Elane Grener and instructor / employee Linda Wolf of A Tangled Tale in Powell, Ohio said that in their experience, men tend to embark on more complicated pieces involving color-work, pattern-work, or complicated lacing based on the analytical challenges those projects present.

Despite this respect these shop owners have for the men who come into their stores, they are at a loss as to what, if anything, can be done to better attract men into their stores. All of them indicated that they do their best to make all patrons feel welcome in their shops and that they try to offer the best advice they can, regardless of the sex of the knitter. However, this doesn't seem to be enough.

Lewis offered her opinion that men who knit, especially the middle-aged and older males have a sort of ‘don't ask, don't tell policy’ and do not talk about their knitting hobby. Many of these men may feel uncomfortable about knitting in public, even if it is in an all male knitting group. Lewis went on to say that it may just be a male ego thing among the older gentlemen – the old gender roles that indicate ‘men don't knit’ or that knitting is ‘for women’ and it may play a roll in keeping them from showing up to knitting groups or talking about it with their friends.

WonderKnit, located just a few miles north of The Ohio State University in the Clintonville Arts District seemed to be in a better position than the other stores. Bruce said that her shop is located in a prime spot for attracting men due to a combination of having a younger demographic nearby, the men in the area tend to be more comfortable with expanding gender roles and there are a large number of DIYers and more ‘artsy types’. Bruce said that men such as these make up “approximately 10% of my total clientele and a lot of these men are regulars and a part of the shop's ‘extended family’.”

After being offended by her “MAN IN THE STORE!” experience, Bruce said that she wanted to make sure that no one ever felt uncomfortable or out of place in her store. She left me with her parting thoughts on men who knit: “People should stop acting like it's weird. Male designers need to step up and design more for other men. And women should be more welcoming and stop acting like they're aliens.”

Good advice.