

'It's important to keep people knitting because it has all sorts of health benefits'

A good yarn

Knitters love to knit – but what happens when you run out of people to wear your jumpers and hats? We visit a charity taking in thousands of beautifully crafted garments every year and sending them to people who need them most

photography
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Down a cobbled lane in north London, there's a warehouse with mountains of yarn, a hoard of knitting needles, and a stack of just-delivered parcels. Hilde Nakkash, 71, is opening the post. She unwraps knitted scarves with zig-zag edging, patchwork blankets, a pair of rainbow socks. There are always lots of socks.

Hilde is a volunteer at Knit for Peace, a charity that links prolific knitters with worthy causes: baby clothes might be sent to hospitals, teddies to children's charities and handmade jumpers and socks to homeless shelters. Hilde is particularly passionate about socks. 'If it's cold, they are the first thing you put on to warm up,' she says. She also works at a local food bank, where people often come in without them: 'It's painful to see.' Hilde knits all her own socks, as well as extra pairs for food bank regulars.

Knit for Peace was founded by Dame Hilary Blume, 79, a dedicated problem solver who has spent her life working in the voluntary sector. 'It's important to keep people knitting because it has all sorts of health benefits,' she says. 'The problem is: who do you knit for?' There are only so many outfits you can gift to ungrateful relatives, only so many newborns you know in want of a baby blanket. 'All we had to do was find people who needed these things,' says Dame Hilary. 'And look what's happened.'

She gestures to the bulging white sacks behind her, piled high. There are more than 50 bags stuffed with blankets, clothes and toys, representing a couple of months' worth of donated knitting, sent in by crafters from across the UK, plus a few from further afield. They will be sorted, then distributed to the people who need them; the charity sends to around 200 outlets. In the winter, large blankets and adult clothes are claimed almost as soon as they arrive; babywear tends to hang around for longer.

It's hard to keep track of the numbers of knitters who have donated over the years, say the volunteers – it could be more than 20,000. One thing is certain, though: they are grateful for a reason to pick up their needles.

The charity gives them an excuse to practise a hobby that is good for them. Research shows knitting lowers blood

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pressure, reduces depression and anxiety, slows the onset of dementia, and distracts from chronic pain. It's even better if you knit in a group, for the social aspect.

In a survey of 1,000 of the charity's knitters, 92% said knitting improved their mood, 65% said knitting for others made them feel useful, and 56% said they would find it hard to find an outlet for their knitting if it weren't for Knit for Peace. Of the respondents, 67% were over 60. The charity also works to promote knitting, providing materials for low-income crafters and setting up groups in schools, prisons and hospitals.

The wool pack

Left: Hilde (far left, standing) and Dame Hilary (far left, sitting) with volunteers.

Below: some of the charity's beautiful items

Designs land in Hampstead, where they are organised by a committed team of volunteers. 'You get to know people's knitting,' says Jenny Edwards, 62. 'You start to recognise names.' She can pick up a striped mitten and identify the maker, a woman named Barbara who sends in 20 pairs every couple of weeks. Many contain letters. 'Often they come with heartbreak,' says Hilde. 'You get notes saying things like, "This is the last item my mother knitted..." Others say knitting for the charity is a lifeline.'

Volunteers are constantly impressed by the time and creativity poured into stand-out creations. Lately, everyone has been charmed by a family of knitted animals with long legs and sophisticated outfits. There's a donkey in dungarees, a tiger in a frilly pink dress and a monkey in a button-up hoodie – all by a knitter called Briony from London.

Exceptional knits like these are set aside, contenders for their regular 'knit of the day' feature on social media. In the running today: an adult-sized cable knit jumper in teal, with matching hat, and a pile of beautifully detailed blankets. 'They wouldn't be out of place in a fancy high-end shop,' says volunteer Stella Howells, 66. Recent posts have highlighted a crochet dressing gown by Lynette in Surrey, a selection of toys from Louise in Greater Manchester (including two mermaids and a panda), and a trio of Fair Isle hats sent by Ange in South Wales.

Then there are the miscellaneous items they don't necessarily ask for, like handbags, ponchos and headbands. 'If, I don't know, Tom Daley knits a shoulder bag for his gold medals, that will start a trend for knitting shoulder bags, some of which will probably end up here,' says Jenny. 'But we will find



‘a home for it.’ The strangest delivery was a collection of anatomically correct knitted breasts. ‘We sewed flowers over the nipples and put them in toys,’ says Jenny, cheerfully.

Nothing goes to waste. Strings of knitted bunting were repurposed into twiddlemuffs, which are hand warmers made up of different textures, often with buttons and ribbons attached. These are given to dementia patients for fidgeting, to provide stimulation and combat restlessness.

Some deliveries are less helpful than others. Once, they were mystified to receive box after box of scraps – yarn, fabric, fluff. To their dismay, they discovered the charity had been mentioned in an online blog about decluttering. Sometimes, they are sent the aftermath of whacky fundraising projects. ‘There’s a lot of silliness,’ says Dame Hilary. She is critical of ambitions to wrap up monuments in granny squares, for instance, or produce record-breaking scarves of impractical lengths. ‘You just think, why?’ These mutant knits invariably end up at Knit for Peace, where volunteers attempt to turn them into something more useful, if somewhat grumpily.

Their excessive collection of needles is another challenge. Though they send pairs to aspiring knitters in need, they receive donations at a much faster rate than they can shift. ‘Charity shops won’t take them because



Purl of wisdom

From top: Hilde (left) and Dame Hilary; some of the charity’s many spare knitting needles

they are classed as a weapon,’ sighs Jenny. At a loss for what to do with them all, last year they held a competition for creative solutions. Entrants suggested using them as kebab skewers, marshmallow toasting prongs and even leg scratchers. Dame Hilary uses her own spare needles to prop up hyacinths. Hilde once tried to make a lampshade out of them but was unimpressed with the outcome. For now, they sit in this corner of London, multiplying.

Mostly, though, the team is focused on getting finished knits to where they are most wanted. And while the needles that are banished here might be unloved at the moment, Knit for Peace knows their value. Armed with a pair, you can boost your wellbeing as well as making clothing that might just keep someone warm all winter. ☼

For more information, see knitforpeace.org.uk



In June 2023, Hazel Rowley sat outside her cottage in Snowdonia, knitting next to signs advertising the charity. It was Knit in Public Day, the largest knitter-run event in the world. ‘About two people

Needle work
Hazel outside her cottage in Snowdonia

walked past,’ says Hazel, 71. ‘We live very remotely.’

A retired teacher, Hazel got involved with Knit for Peace five years ago. She knits from scratch, and completes unfinished projects that are posted to the charity, often by bereaved relatives.

‘I’ve been knitting since I was six, but I was running out of people to knit for,’ she says.

For the charity, she makes large blankets, adult jumpers, and hats. ‘Not bright things with big bobbles on top,’ she says, ‘but hats that men can wear without feeling embarrassed.’ She has donated around 50 to

100 items. ‘I knit what I know is most needed – items that keep someone warm,’ she says.

Hazel knits most days, totalling 10 to 20 hours a week. ‘It’s relaxing but productive,’ she says. ‘I like the mental challenge. If I’m finishing an incomplete project, I don’t usually have the pattern, so I have to improvise. Since I’m retired, I don’t have work to test me in that way.’

‘I’m pleased people will be more comfortable because of what I make. Knit for Peace is a great organisation that helps a lot of people. I’m delighted to be part of it.’