

Working with the shirts off their backs for a cause

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Bulletin staff

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With pearl buttons, aces and campy cowgirls, actor Robin Williams probably won't miss the shirt he gave to JP weaver Claudia Mills. A good thing, since Mills ripped the shirt to shreds to weave it into a rug.

That shirt just looked like him, like his personality, laughed Mills. Adding that not all of the clothes she received—mainly shirts—was what she would have expected considering the donors.

William's shirt is one of many donated by celebrities, such as Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, for the "Shirts Off Their Backs" program—a fundraiser sponsored by the Society for Arts and Crafts' YES! Fund to benefit Artists for Humanity, an organization that gives inner-city youth a chance to learn craft skills. Specifically, the funds will go toward Artists for Humanity's work to build a ceramics studio for Boston-area at-risk youth.

Two of the celebrity rugs—the Matt Damon, Ben Affleck rug and the Sopranos'—will be auctioned off at www.craftboston.org on Wed, May 19. The auction starts at noon at \$200 dollars and continues through Sunday, May 23. Bidding, which is powered by

Ebay, ends at 9 p.m. All of the rugs will be on display at the upcoming CraftBoston event, held at the World Trade Center May 21-23.

The five rugs that are not part of the online-auction will be sold by raffle at the show. Young people from Artists for Humanity will staff the booth, which will be one of 175 exhibits at this year's show.

The Society of Arts and Crafts executive director, Beth Gerstein, was part of the committee that brainstormed the idea for the rugs, and was the one to select Jamaica Plain resident and weaver Claudia Mills for the job. The rugs came about as "a rolling idea that took on a life of its own," said Gerstein, and Mills was "a really good match" for the project.

Mills worked on the rugs at her studio, a carriage house in JP that is part of the Jamaica Plain Open Studios tour. Two imposing looms fill the sunny space where Mills and her employees weave handbags, throw rugs and runners from hundreds of yards of brightly colored fabrics, which are stacked nearly to the ceiling along the studio's far wall.

"I'm not an 'artist,'" Mills said of the handbags and rugs, "I make all functional work." Mills, who "always loved textiles as a child, and sewed con-

stantly," studied weaving in college, while taking every type of art class available at Ohio University.

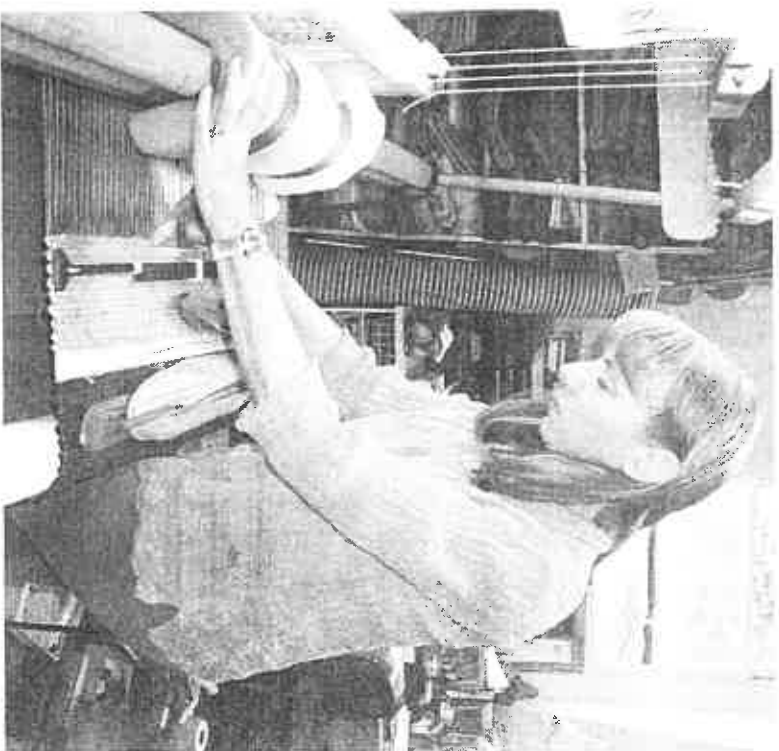
During school, Mills took summer jobs on Martha's Vineyard, where she fell in love with New England. After graduation she moved to Boston and began making scarves and other wearable items.

In 1985 she took a rug class and "got hooked" on using fabric fragments. She started selling her rug creations around 1990, when she went to her first shows.

As a rag rug maker, Mills initially used recycled rags, old clothes, sheets, and textiles for her pieces. The fabric is torn or cut into strips and then woven into rugs, runners, throws or bags, which Mills sells at trade shows, galleries, and stores. Mills also specializes in custom pieces created using a selection of over 50 colors to mesh with a client's décor. She also does custom-sized rugs for specific spaces.

For 'Shirts Off Their Backs,' Mills made a total of seven two-foot by three-foot celebrity rugs that include an autographed canvas square stitched to each piece.

In addition to the Matt Ben and Robin Williams rugs, the following celebrity rugs will be featured at the event:



Claudia Mills, weaver for "Shirt Off Their Backs" fundraiser.

- "The Sopranos" rug includes fabric from Edie Falco, Michael Imperioli, and Jamie Lyn Discala.

- The "Magnificent New England," made from shirts sent by Denis Leary, Nancy Kerrigan, Alice Hoffman, Doug Flutie, Cam Neely and Kate Bosworth.

- The "Celebrity Boston Chiefs" rug features shirt ribbons from Todd English of Olive's and Ming Tsai of Blue Ginger.

- A "Red Sox Rug" features ballplayer Derek Lowe

and others.

- The "New England Patriots" rug is comprised of shirt shreds from 10 Patriots, including Bill Belichick, Roert Kraft, Joe Andruzzi, Deion Branch, and Mike Vabrel.

For more information about the show, visit www.craftboston.org; for more information about the Society of Arts and Crafts and Artists for Humanity, visit www.societyofcrafts.org; and for more information about Claudia Mills' Studio, visit www.claudiamills.com or email [Claudia at \[Cludia@claudiamills.com\]\(mailto:Claudia@claudiamills.com\)](mailto:Claudia@claudiamills.com).