Fabric of Our Community

By: Victoria Ford

In Spark's Makers Lab, upstairs at the Ocean County Library headquarters in Toms River on a Wednesday morning, ladies gather around some tables piled high with fabric, ribbons, lace, buttons, baubles, and other supplies. Each is creating a 6-inch mixed media square that represents her life, loves, heritage, faith, or worldview, for a quilt that will represent the diversity of the population of Ocean County.



Sparks Lab Makers Room, Ocean County Library
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

The quilt is a project of an organization called Ocean County RAFT, Reaching Across Faith Traditions, whose mission is "to create a vibrant community that fosters respect, appreciation and friendship through shared knowledge of all faiths."

The organization's co-founder Lisa Gertner is thinking about making hers in the shape of a flower with each petal symbolizing an important aspect of her life.



RAFT members Samantha Gertner, Mona Khan and Lisa Gertner, shown here with a drop-in crafter.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

The project began in June, she explained, with RAFT members calling and visiting faith-based and community groups, senior living centers, fire companies and anywhere else they could think of, inviting people to participate. By July, Gertner had secured verbal commitments from about 100 participants.

In both a figurative and a literal sense, the project shows how people take many different routes to the same destination.

The theme of universal acceptance – the idea that "this is our community we live in, and everyone has a place in it" – is integral to the organization's goals. RAFT is open to all, Hindus, Buddhists, Baptists and Atheists. "We all want the same things," Gertner said. "Safety, understanding, a sense of belonging."

Creatively speaking, the same thinking applies. The guidelines for the quilt project allowed for …. "People are very crafty," Gertner said.

Participants were asked to keep the following questions in mind: "Who are you?

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What makes you, you? Your answer will show other people what you find important. It does not necessarily need to be religious, unless that is integral to your identity."



Quilt making supplies.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

For help with square-making during the drop-in hours, the library has sewing machines available; but iron-on patches and "fusable web" adhesives are good no-sew options, Gertner explained. For those who want to participate but don't necessarily have the know-how, Gertner said she had tried to connect people who have ideas with people who have skills. The drop-in sessions were an opportunity for participants to exchange tips and techniques.

To market the project on social media, Gertner started posting a "patch of the day," highlighting one contributor's patch and the story of how they designed and created it.

One example is Florence Markowitz – "she is 86 years old, and she is my hero," Gertner said. Markowitz used scrapbooking stickers that best described her life and interests – words such as friends, family, dance, peace, gratitude, reading, writing and happy.



Quilt square.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

One contributor sewed three flags to show her origin and belief system. Fazeelat Ahmad made a square depicting a hijab, a sign of modesty worn by some Muslim women: "A simple piece of cloth is called a hijab and it is my identity," read the words on the patch.

A woman named Gloria who was born in Puerto Rico and came to the United States with her mom as a young girl said she had decided to drop in for the quilting session because she loves to quilt. She soon learned the Fabric of Our Community project would be more of a creative challenge for her than she expected – "because I don't have a pattern to follow."

Another RAFT co-founder Mona Khan and Gertner's daughter Samantha showed up at the library with more supplies to add to the fun. Sam had found little charms in the shape of a chamsa (a symbol of good luck in Judaism) and little decorative skulls, which are appropriate for her because she is a grief counselor.

As the women set to work on their squares, they chatted about their differences and similarities. And that's an equally important part of the project's purpose: As

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crafters come to the same table and sit around with a shared objective, they talk and learn about what they have in common.



Hand beaded quilt square.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

"It's almost like Islam and Christianity are siblings, and Judaism is the cool older cousin," Samantha Gertner explained.

"Mona is Muslim and I'm Jewish, and historically you'd think we don't get along, but I don't understand that," Lisa Gertner said.

In most instances, Khan said, "I feel that our differences are mostly political, not personal."

Khan said she feels one important aim of the project is self-awareness. Gertner added the Fabric of Our Community is "like a beautiful mosaic."

Aug. 30 is the deadline to complete and submit the squares.

An unveiling of the quilt and a special reception will be held Oct. 23 in Mancini Hall at the library. Dignitaries will be invited to attend. After its stay at the library, the quilt be a traveling exhibit.