

By Danielle S. Tepper for Potomac Lifestyle - February 2018

Some people celebrate milestone birthdays by doing something fun, crazy or out of character—they buy motorcycles or go skydiving. Others celebrate another decade of life by turning dreams into reality, which is precisely what Anja Caldwell did when she turned 50 two years ago and decided to open FiberArt.Studio.

The small shop, located in the Potomac Promenade Mall, can be misleading to passersby who often mistake it for a yarn or craft store. Caldwell thinks of it as more of a school. She grew up in Germany, where they value the arts and teach sewing to kids as early as elementary school. “It’s very crafty over there and that’s what I’ve tried to bring here,” she says. “It’s not everybody’s thing, but it really is a dying art: Knitting and crocheting—all the ‘old’ stuff. One of my slogans is, ‘Learn something old today.’”

Caldwell holds adult classes in the morning, and an afternoon class three days a week for kids ages six to 16. This offers them a “safe space” where they can unplug and learn a new skill. She believes digital devices are to blame for much of today’s youth’s unfamiliarity with what her eldest daughter refers to as “grandma stuff.”

“I have kids who don’t know what a needle is or they don’t know that a needle has a hole,” she says. “They call the sewing machine ‘that vibrating thing over there.’ I can tell that, at a certain age, I just lose them to their phones in here and it is sad. The real skill of it—those fine motor skills of working with your fingers—is getting lost. I’ve set out to change that by creating this place.”

Caldwell’s paternal grandmother was a master seamstress and her maternal grandfather was a tailor, but it took 25 years of working in architecture for Caldwell to finally indulge her “feminine side” and utilize the skills that run in her family. She came to the U.S. in 1997 and discovered her passion for teaching kids while working as a volunteer for the German International School Washington, and running summer camps at Glen Echo Park.

“The kids like me, even though I’m pretty strict with them. They crave that. Recently, I think we’ve started helping kids too much,” she says. “I like to challenge them a bit, make them figure things out. It’s quiet in here; they turn their phones off and can be left alone for a little while. The most fun is when they start teaching each other, putting a spin on the patterns. That’s awesome to watch.”

Caldwell recognizes the current trend of being crafty again, but that true creativity is still lacking.

“It’s all pre-made stuff; glue and glitter—you just stick it all together,” she says. “Anybody can do that. What’s the fun in that? Glue is actually considered a bad word in here.”

She encourages her students to use their imagination. She remembers one young girl in particular who used needle felting to make a beautiful little duck:

“She went on a cruise and lost it. That’s probably the one toy she’ll always remember exactly where she lost it,” says Caldwell. “When she came back to class, she was heartbroken, but I told her, ‘You know what, you made it yourself—you can make a new one. How cool is that?’”

It is Caldwell’s hope that places like hers will become successful and popular again a generation from now, because people will have re-acquired the skills and the desire to make things by hand.

“You have the time to create art, if you think about it,” she says. “If you put your phone away, you could do a lot. It’s also a confidence thing. Just sit down and focus and don’t be discouraged that it’s not perfect. There’s nothing like making things yourself—it’s like cooking from scratch with fresh ingredients, instead of frozen stuff. That’s what we do here.”

When she’s not teaching kids, Caldwell is content in her surroundings. Most of the items found around the studio are her own creations, from carefully knitted handbags to tiny embroidered dolls.

“I’m my own worst enemy in here,” she laughs. “I’m supposed to clean up or do this or that, but before I know it, I accidentally made a hat!” She looks fondly at the brightly colored creations lining her shelves.

“This is my happy place.”

FiberArt.Studio also offers adult classes, birthday party packages, and other event specials. To sign up or to become a member, visit [www.fiberart.studio](http://www.fiberart.studio).

