



Art & Craft

Threads of Hope: Sistering's Spun Studio

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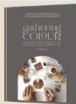
By **Michelle
Woodvine**

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It's a pre-pandemic day in an outwardly unassuming building on one of Toronto's busiest streets. Barbara Aikman and Asunta "Sue" DiTrani, studio facilitators at [Sistering's Spun Studio](#), present one of the studio's participants with a cheque—earnings from the sale of textiles the woman had created in the Spun Studio Entrepreneur program. She accepts the money with a whoop of joy that quickly turns to tears as she wraps Sue in a hug.

Related reading:
["SISTERING..."](#), a
prose poem written
by one of the
program's
participants.

This piece of paper represents far, far more than a first payday: it represents validation.

To fully understand the impact of this moment, we must take a step back in time to a policy decision that redefined what it meant to be a marginalized person in Canada.

Deinstitutionalization in Canada

In the early 1960s, the Canadian government began the [deinstitutionalization](#) of psychiatric patients across the country. In the two decades that followed, more than eighty per cent of psychiatric beds were closed; the government's promise of funding for community support for former patients never materialized; and some of the most vulnerable found themselves alienated from their families and left to

cope on their own. With nowhere to go and little to no support, many became homeless, living—and dying—on the streets of Canada’s biggest cities.

Sistering

In 1980, a group of women—comprising local residents, representatives from women’s agencies, and women living in hostels—came together in Toronto’s Scadding Court neighbourhood, determined to find a way to meet the needs of the growing number of homeless and transient women living on Toronto’s streets.

Together, they created **Sistering**, a multi-service agency that validates the experiences of at-risk, socially isolated women and trans people, regardless of outcomes.

Now located on Toronto’s busy Bloor Street West, Sistering welcomes a diverse community of women and trans folks whose experiences may include violence, substance use, mental health issues, disability, immigration, and poverty. Sistering participants have access to a 24-hour drop-in centre, a team of doctors and nurses, housing counsellors, harm reduction services, and an innovative, textile-based social enterprise called Spun Studio.



One of several industrial sewing machines at Spun, ready and waiting for participants to return to in-person classes and workshops.

Spun Studio

Sistering's textile initiatives go back more than a decade, to a time when one of the Sistering staff taught participants how to use industrial sewing machines so that they could earn an income in Toronto's then-bustling textile and garment manufacturing sector.

Fast forward to 2019, and Sistering's textile and fibre-crafting community included as many as sixty-five participants in what is now known as [Spun Studio](#). The Spun program includes classes and recreational groups for sewing, embroidery, quilting, weaving, knitting, crochet, beading, and macramé.



At the start of the pandemic, Spun Studio participants swung into action, making fabric face masks for the Sistering staff.

But for the Spun community it's not just about learning new skills or even about earning money through the sale of their finished items. Through Spun, many participants take part in wider community initiatives and become a part of something larger than themselves, experiencing validation of their skills and the benefits of helping others—important steps toward healing.



Threads of hope. A small selection of the many bags, table linens, aprons, scrubbies, garments, accessories, quilts, macramé hangers, and more, created by Spun Studio participants.

Community Voices

In 2019, Spun Studio partnered with the [Textile Museum's Community Voices](#) program, where participants learned print making, rug hooking, and tapestry weaving. When their pieces were completed, the women experienced the thrill and validation of seeing their work displayed on the walls of the museum.

Flags of Hope

Last year, Spun Studio participated in the Flags of Hope campaign with quilter/designer Bev Stevens from the [York Heritage Quilters Guild](#), and Irene Paterson from [Flags of Hope](#). Flags of Hope is a national, multi-city initiative to create small, decorated, fabric "flags," honouring the lives of individuals who have lost their lives to toxic drugs and overdose, and giving hope to those still struggling with addiction.

Spun Studio participants created flags to honour individuals from Sistering who have lost their lives to substance use. They then sewed these flags, and the flags created by several other groups, into a series of eleven quilts. On August 31, 2021, the quilts were displayed at Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto, as Mayor John Tory raised the Opioid Awareness Flag over City Hall.



"Flags of Hope." Clockwise from left: Close-up of one of the flags being created for "Flags of Hope;" a section of the completed quilt; Sue points out one of the flags to a visitor.



The Sistering Memorial quilt. Made by Spun Studio participants, this quilt honours women from Sistering who have passed away, giving each of them a fabric leaf inscribed with their name.



Spun Studio quilting volunteer Mical Pearlman (left) from the York Heritage Quilters Guild and Irene Paterson (right) from Flags of Hope, with the completed Spun Studio "Flags of Hope" quilt.

The Entrepreneur Mentorship Group

In June 2019, Spun Studio launched a new initiative called the Entrepreneur Mentorship Group. This group meets biweekly on Thursdays to make items destined for sale through the Spun Shop. Unlike the recreational crafting group, participants in the Entrepreneur program learn how to create retail-quality items. They learn essential business skills, like how to interact with customers, manage money, create tags for their pieces, and even write their maker's story for the Spun Shop website.

The program has made an impact. When participants see their items go up on the website and then sell out almost immediately, it can be an overwhelming moment. Sue adds, "Sometimes when we pay the women their money, they cry. They've never experienced anyone validate their talent. Knitting or sewing has always been an accepted part of their lives, but they've never been paid for it."

Items available for sale through the Spun Shop include woven table linens, mittens, children's sweaters, aprons, tote bags, crocheted scrubbies (sold together with soaps, handmade at Spun).

COVID Challenges

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Spun Studio, like other craft-related enterprises, moved their activities online. While the women who come to the studio are housed, many live alone and do not have reliable access to the internet. With help from a grant, Barb and Sue were able to purchase tablets and data plans, so that participants could virtually connect to each other and the studio. But despite this connection, maintaining a sense of community online has been hard in many ways. It's been challenging to teach and trouble-shoot remotely, and for recent immigrants limited English language skills can be a barrier to online participation.

In-person sessions provide a place for participants to go—often an important break from their living situation—and for many women in the program, those in-person visits were a lifeline. Throughout the pandemic Sue has kept up a regular schedule of calls to check in on participants, and for some her call is the first time that they've spoken to another human being in several days.

Found Family

Society has a way of making its most marginalized and vulnerable people feel invisible—even to themselves. But at Spun Studio, Barb and Sue, together with their team of volunteers, help participants develop a sense of belonging and self-esteem. It is a safe space where participants learn new skills, gain confidence, and validate their self-worth. This community provides them with connection. As Sue explains, “Some people have lost their homes, some have been abused, lost their children, have mental health or substance abuse issues, have been hospitalized. They come to Sistering looking for family.” And under Barb and Sue’s nurturing care, they find it.

Spun Studio Needs You

As makers, we understand the value of creating. Here are some of the ways that we can help the makers at Spun Studio to create a brighter future, one stitch at a time.

Shop! Visit the Spun Shop at <https://sistering.org/shop/> and browse their collection of table linens, accessories, bags, and more. Contact Barb at spunstudio@sistering.org to find out more about the products, availability (items sell out fast!), and to arrange

for contactless pick up (Spun Studio is not able to ship orders as yet).

Donations Sistering and Spun Studio would not exist without the generosity of donors. The studio is grateful for donations of fabric, materials, tools (including knitting needles, crochet hooks, sewing notions, etc.) Contact spunstudio@sistering.org for more information. Monetary donations can be made through cash or cheque, mailed, or dropped off to Spun Studio. Contact baikman@sistering.org for more information.

Volunteer Volunteers are vital to the program. Whether you're a local crafter, writer, artist, or businessperson, your help is always welcome and greatly appreciated. As Barb says, “We cannot thank [our volunteers] enough. We could not do what we do without them. Not just on the skills side, but on the marketing side as well.” Contact Barb at spunstudio@sistering.org to learn how you can help! **Retail Space** As COVID-19 restrictions are being lifted in the City of Toronto, Spun Studio looks forward to the day when participants can return to in-person retail opportunities. If you have a festival, market, bazaar, or other space suitable for retail booths or pop-up shops, please consider donating space to Spun Studio. Barb and Sue would like to thank the many Toronto businesses, hotels, churches and local yarn shops who have provided them with retail space over the years, including the Gladstone Hotel, The Purple Purl, and Romni Wools.

Outside of Toronto?

Find ways to help closer to home by exploring your local government and social services websites and social media pages for similar organizations in your area.

For crisis support resources

Visit the Government of Canada website at <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/mental-health-services/mental-health-get-help.html#a1>

All images courtesy of Sistering/Spun Studio.



About Michelle Woodvine

Michelle Woodvine is a Toronto-based freelance writer and editor on a quest to never stop learning and making. When not wordsmithing for others, Michelle can usually be found working on her trilogy of speculative fiction novels, learning a new skill, or goofing around with her family (including her very own rocket scientist, two teenage boys, and one feisty ginger cat). Follow the weird, wonderful, and wordy adventures @woodvinewrites or visit www.woodvinewrites.com

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