



# Rain Gardens

IN WEST MICHIGAN

# Biking

FOR SOCIAL BENEFITS

Grand Haven woman shares challenge of owning Sri Lankan restaurant

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## Do our personalities change with the season?

Spring is here. I can smell it. I smell the worms. The earth. Can almost smell fresh cut grass, lemons and suntan lotion.

I smelled it all through winter. I smelled it while I was shoveling snow. I smelled it while I was scraping the ice off my windshield. I smelled the scent of spring everywhere, and woke up bitter every day.

I suppose I did it to myself. That's what happens when you spend all of January and February cooped up inside preparing the next spring issue of your magazine. Writing about picnics and bike paths and gardens is enough to make anyone want to get up, buy a picnic basket, a new bike and a trusty hoe. It left me depressed most of winter. But the snow is melting, slowly, and I'm wondering if my mood is melting too.

I suppose that's what I wanted to accomplish with this issue of *I Magazine*. I thought maybe, just maybe, this issue could help women step into a new routine, a new focus, a hopeful perspective with the new season. This issue is simple. It's a quick and easy guide to helping you celebrate you, and spring, right here in West Michigan. This issue explores how local women are turning to biking as a spiritual experience to do alone or as a social experience to seek in a group. It will point you toward local biking groups, like the Macatawa Cycling Club, and good trails to ride in the area.

This issue's "I Profile" features Dileni Ratnayake, owner of Thali Bistro in Grand Haven. The article follows the hardships Dileni faces while running a tiny authentic Sri Lankan restaurant off the beaten path in a West Michigan tourist town.

We have other fun things in store like a sassy spring quiz, picnic recipes and tips on growing a rain garden in West Michigan. Overall, I just want you to read this issue, cover to cover, and walk away feeling celebrated — socially and culturally — as a strong woman in West Michigan embracing a new season.

It's spring. Can you smell it?

Enjoy this issue of



Erin L'Hotta  
Editor



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# KNITTING THROUGH THE SEASONS



by Teresa Heinz Housel

It is 10 am on a crisp spring morning in Holland.

The smell of brewed coffee wafts through the front screen door to the knitting shop. After the lounge chairs are placed neatly in a circle, Ruby Kickert and Rose Walton are open for visitors.

Kickert and Walton are co-owners of Friends of Wool, located in Holland's Washington Square. The two women are long-time practitioners of a craft that is having a recent resurgence in popularity, even during the spring and summer months when knitting would seemingly be not a common pastime.

According to a national survey by the Craft Yarn Council of America, 53 million American women know how to knit or crochet, a 51 percent increase over the past 10 years.

Contrary to stereotypes, many knitters are younger. *Knitty*, a free web-based knitting magazine founded in 2002, surveyed its readership in 2005. The magazine found that most readers were between ages 19 and 49.

## Knittin' past

In the past, knitting was usually passed down to children from their older relatives. Ruth Sill, a Grand Rapids native, is a Holland resident with three grown children. Sill said that she learned how to knit as a young girl from her mother, a talented knitter.

"When I was 10, my mother would give me a dollar, and I would take the bus to

downtown Grand Rapids for 10 cents and back home for 10 cents," Sill recalled. "That left me with 80 cents to spend."

With her extra money in hand, Sill would visit one of the two downtown dime stores on Main Street. After sipping a Coke at the store soda fountain, she would spend the rest on yarn and sewing supplies before taking the bus back home.

Sill often made sweaters and afghans in high school and college, but put the hobby mostly aside while raising her family. In recent years, though, she's come back to her old hobby.

Sill said that she purchases yarn from local shops such as Friends of Wool. Tucked behind a 1920s storefront façade, the two-room shop houses shelves and display cabinets stacked with knitting needles, pattern books, and yarn skeins of all textures and colors. The store's décor and product offerings change with the season. During spring and summer the store features more cotton yarns and knitting projects for blankets and purses that correspond with the warmer season.

"People often knit things with cotton during the summer," Walton said, Friends of Wool co-owner.

Even though people generally knit less during spring and summer, the warmer months are often a time when knitters will work ahead to make holiday gifts and colder-weather items.

The store offers knitting lessons, workshops, and twice-weekly "open knitting" times in which people can drop by, and get a head



start on knitting wedding, baby shower or Christmas presents in the company of other knitters.

"There is a big variety of items that people knit for gifts," Walton said.

Popular gifts include baby items, sweaters, felted purses and felted clogs, Walton said.

### Knittin' now

Before opening their knitting shop, Walton and Kickert ran an insurance business together on Fairbanks Avenue in Holland. They turned part of their insurance office into a knitting store in 2000. In 2003, they closed the insurance business to operate the knitting shop full-time before moving to their present Washington Square location.

The cozy atmosphere befits the space that is both a store and friendly gathering place for knitters. During that morning last May, the bang of the closing screen door announced the arrival of both potential knitters inquiring about the craft and experienced knitters looking for specific yarn types.

Every now and then, local residents stop by to chat and work on current projects in the company of fellow knitters. The scene is reminiscent of a spring quilting bee, or a local coffee shop where neighbors visit and support each other.

### Trendy yet therapeutic

Local knitters partially attribute knitting's renewed popularity to its artistic qualities. There are two basic types of knitting stitches called knits and purls. Knitting needles are usually made of plastic, metal, or bamboo.

In recent years, new multi-colored yarns and knitting techniques have given enthusiasts new texture and design options. One currently trendy knitting technique is felting, where the completed wool item is shrunk to create a dramatic fuzzy effect. Felting is often used for handbag and hat designs.

"It is being marketed as an art form," Sill said, describing the availability of new types of yarns. "You don't save money doing it. People are sewing and knitting for creativity."

This creativity especially appeals to younger knitters such as Holly Evenhouse, a Hope College sophomore from Lombard, Ill. Evenhouse said that a friend taught her how to knit several months ago. Now, she is working on a baby blanket for her 4-month-old niece.

"I think there's a satisfaction in someone complimenting you...and being able to say, 'Thanks, I knit it myself,'" Evenhouse said.

In addition to creativity, knitters say that the craft's therapeutic and social aspects are especially good benefits all year round. Kickert, the Friends of Wool's co-owner, said that the rhythm of knitting and movement of yarn through her hands helped her meditate after she was diagnosed with breast cancer a few years ago.


In the weeks after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, young knitters gathered at a Los Angeles yarn store, La Knitterie Parisienne, to quietly talk and knit.

"They needed to get away from the television and just to talk to each other," said owner Edith Eig in an April 7, 2002 *USA Weekend* article.

Local knitters, too, describe friendships cemented by their shared interest.

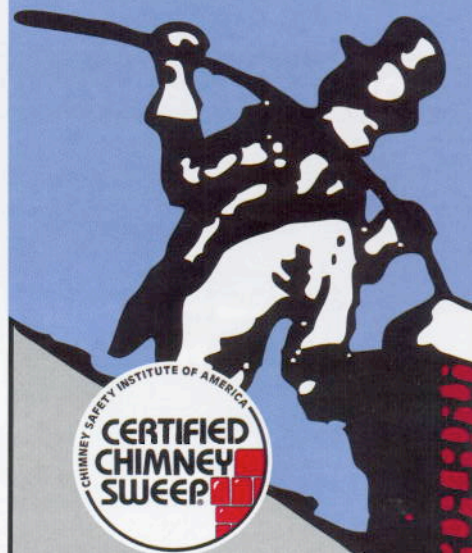
Evenhouse is not a member of Hope College's student-run Knitting Club, which was formed in 2001. However, she nonetheless often knits with friends.

"My friend and I knit before the Gathering [a campus Sunday night church service], and we are in the process of watching old seasons of *Veronica Mars*, so we usually set aside an hour about once a week to knit and watch another episode," Evenhouse said.

Sill said that one of her friends, who is an "excellent knitter," sometimes takes her current project into Friends of Wool so she can chat with others while working. "Knitting has also turned into a social thing," said Sill. "It is a support group." 



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