

Skein Slayers: Building Community and Connection One Stitch at a Time

By Scott Laird

There is new group in Vernonia-- maybe you've seen their flyer and wondered what it was all about.

They're called "Skein Slayers," and in case you still haven't figured out what they do, they're working to bring together and improve our community through the power of yarn.

OK-- first, let's explain the name. A *skein* is a loosely-wound ball of yarn. And this group takes those skeins and *slays* them through knitting-- turns them into beautiful hats and scarves for children and others in the community.

"It's an incredible outreach opportunity," says original member DeAnna Pearl.

Skein Slayers was the brainchild of Pearl and community member Catherine Helmer, who had been talking about forming a knitting group-- a place for people to gather to knit and talk. That idea expanded to knitting hats and scarves for the Vernonia Community Closet, which serves local

families in need with clothing and personal hygiene supplies. The group formed with the idea of promoting collaboration between a number of local entities-- local businesses, citizens of all ages, the City of Vernonia, and local service organizations.

The other intention was to create a place for cross-generational connection, a safe space for teens and adults to meet and discuss topics of interest or concern. The hope was to develop mentorships, to create support for each other and create educational opportunities by introducing newcomers to knitting-- which led to a few more partnerships.

Vernonia Florist became a collaborator when they started holding weekly classes which included an introduction to knitting. The Vernonia Prevention Coalition helped sponsor seven teens, paying for them to take an initial series of knitting classes and for supplies.

The Skein Slayers group began meeting this past November. One of their initial successes was participating in the Giving Tree sponsored by US Bank and the Vernonia Prevention Coalition. The group gathered gifts and personal supplies for local children; when the children came to pick up their gifts, there were many handmade hats and scarves available for them. The kids were thrilled! "The kids just seemed to be transformed," said Helmer about that day. "Their self esteem rose and they



WGS Students show off their scarves they bought with Bee-Bucks, earned for good behavior.

were so energized by it."

This led to another new collaboration.

Handmade hats and scarves are now in place at the school stores at Vernonia schools. The School District has a program that rewards students for good behavior. Each school has a slightly different program-- at Washington Grade School, it's called "Bee-Bucks."

Students receive points for positive behavior which can then be spent at the school store to buy themselves a reward. One of the more popular items in the store has become the knitting projects of the Skein Slayers.

The Skein Slayer's donations to the Bee-Buck store have gained a lot of attention from the students," says WGS Guidance Councilor David Spackman. "Any student can buy a hat or scarf for only three Bee-Bucks. This allows them to get into the hands of students who want and need them most. Their work

is of the highest quality and every item is beautifully unique."

"These kids are spending their personal reward dollars to purchase clothes for themselves," adds Pearl. "They are taking care of themselves and we get to be a part of that. That's very powerful."

The group meets on the second and fourth Monday of the month at the Vernonia Community Learning Center from 6:00 to 7:30 P.M. People can stop by and stay as long as they like-- it is a very informal gathering and there is no need to RSVP ahead. The group has been gathering donations of supplies, and picking them up when they find a good deal or sale, so there are some supplies on hand.

On the evening I visited the group, Vernonia Police Sergeant Mike Kay stopped by to gather a few hats and scarves for local police officers to keep in their patrol vehicles. They will be handed out to children in need of comfort when the officers arrive on the scene of a difficult call where young children might be present.

As the group grows and takes shape, their mission will adjust and form. The response to the hats and scarves at the schools has been very encouraging and, according to Helmer, "...hugely rewarding."

Who knows what will happen next?



Skein Slayer DeAnna Pearl, left, donates scarves and hats to the Vernonia Police Department to be given to children in need.



Catherine Helmer knitting a scarf at a Skein Slayers gathering.



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