

A staple subject

LONGTIME ADULT SCHOOL CLASS TEACHES UPHOLSTERY, WEAVES TOGETHER A 'COMMUNITY OF FRIENDSHIPS'

by Heather Zimmerman

When she enrolled in the Upholstery: Basic Techniques class at the Palo Alto Adult School, Susan Phillips Moskowitz didn't pick something easy for her first project. She planned to reupholster a chair that had been in her husband's family since he was a child — but it was a wingback chair, and smoothly covering its bends and curves was a challenging task for a beginner. "It was very hard and the teachers are wonderfully helpful," she said.

Much like her first project itself, Phillips Moskowitz got more than she bargained for when she joined the class. The chair did prove difficult, and took her a year and a half to reupholster. But by then, it was quite clear that the class in upholstery basics offered more than a chance to learn a craft: This longtime course, offered for more than 60 years, has forged many close connections between students.

"It's a community of friendships," Phillips Moskowitz said describing how classmates come together during each class for scheduled breaks to share coffee and lunch. For the 10:30 a.m. coffee break, she said, people take turns bringing snacks. Classes (held on weekdays), take place from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., so people have a lot of time to spend in the studio working on their projects and getting to know each other.

Classmates spend time outside of class, too; a group is planning



Susan Phillips Moskowitz attached webbing to the frame of a small bench that she re-upholstered in class at the Palo Alto Adult School. The webbing will support the seat. Photo courtesy of Susan Phillips Moskowitz.

to meet and catch up over the long break between fall and winter sessions, Phillips Moskowitz said.

The class teaches a mix of traditional and modern upholstery techniques, according to one of the class' assistant instructors, Shelly Kim. In particular, students use hammers and tacks to affix fabric to frames, a traditional technique, rather than the faster, more modern staple guns.

"We try to follow the traditional style of upholstery," Kim said. "We definitely use modern materials in addition to the more traditional materials. So (for stuffing) we use foam, Dacron at times, but we also do the traditional

technique, so we use cotton, and if someone has an antique chair that was done in horsehair originally, we will teach them how to do it in horsehair."

Kim herself started as a student in the class and for a time, also had teamed with a friend in a business selling upcycled upholstered items. She said she jumped at the chance when the course was looking for an additional assistant instructor. She enjoys crafts in general but finds particular appeal in the variety offered by upholstery.

"The chair is always different, the technique is different, the fabric is different," she said.

For newbies looking to get

started, Kim affirmed the difficulty of Phillips Moskowitz's project.

"I think the most challenging thing is anything that has more detail, anything that has a lot of curves to it, an armchair or a wingback, gets a little more difficult. For beginners, it's great to start out with single-cushion furniture: dining room chairs, slipper chairs or ottomans," Kim said.

She noted that the class lends itself to items that can be upcycled, but if a piece is in rough shape, it might need additional TLC before it can be reupholstered.

"If the frame itself is wobbly,

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you might need to be talking to a woodworker to fix it,” Kim said, adding that mass-produced furniture is often more difficult to reupholster.

Although the course description focuses on chairs and ottomans, more advanced students have certainly brought in many more types of furniture, including large-scale items like sofas.

Phillips Moskowitz counts a few large pieces in her own work.

“I just kept coming up with projects,” she said of the class. “I did a headboard, a chaise lounge, then I started doing benches.”

The wingback chair that started it all for her — now upholstered in a smart navy fabric with a cream check — sits in her Palo Alto living room, where it’s joined by a number of pieces that she has created for family (including matching settees requested by her



Students in the Palo Alto Adult School's upholstery class bring in a variety of pieces to work on, but chairs and ottomans are common projects. Photo courtesy of Susan Phillips Moskowitz.

son) and for a business focusing on upholstered benches. She sells her pieces at Gamble Garden's Spring Tour event.

“My husband says, ‘this is a showroom now. I want my living room back,’” she said with a laugh.

Phillips Moskowitz also used the navy chair fabric on the base

of a large ottoman — previously an orange leather number purchased by her father in the ‘60s — that she said took a whopping 14 yards of cotton to restuff. That ottoman is now topped by colorful fabric with a depiction of an elephant.

Of all her work, though, she

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The winter quarter of Upholstery: Basic Techniques takes place Jan. 7 to March 10 or Jan. 9 to March 12 (depending on the section) at the Palo Alto Adult School. Class fee is \$264. Classes are limited to 21 students and often have wait lists. For more information, call 650-329-3752 or visit paadultschool.org.

said the wingback chair remains her most challenging project yet.

“People are interested in taking on new projects that they haven’t tried before,” Kim said of the class. “It’s so unique, people come just year after year, 10, 15 years or more. They just love the camaraderie, they love working with their hands.” **H+G**

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