

Craft fair puts focus on reusable materials by Erica R. Hendry, Correspondent

ITHACA — Five-year-old Anya Kramer’s eyes barely strayed from the movement of the pattern — blue and red and a hint of brown, weaving in and out of a pair of slim silver knitting needles. “When you’re older it won’t seem so hard,” the crafter, Vera Whisman, said, continuing with a steady rhythm as Kramer asked about the bags, the sweaters — and Whisman’s homemade, multi-colored socks.

Household waste jumps about 25 percent during the holiday season, according to the Department of Environmental Sciences. In an effort to waste less and reuse more, Kramer’s family and other shoppers at the SewGreen ReCraft fair were on an unusual holiday mission: to find gifts useful for their loved ones without calling on new or wasteful material to make it. In its first year, the fair overflowed the left wing of the Women’s Community Building. It is a new event among the barrage of Ithaca holiday celebrations — but SewGreen itself is a new part of Ithaca’s sustainable community.

What began as an “experiment” last January has evolved into a community resource for sustainability in fabric, fibers, sewing and reuse, offering classes from its small office on West Seneca Street and organizing events, like Saturday’s fair, to get people thinking about consumer habits.

“We wanted to counter traditional holiday craft bazaars, which sometimes feature unsustainable materials which are then turned into unsustainable gifts,” said Wendy Skinner, SewGreen’s coordinator.

A used sewing machine sale sold all 10 machines within two hours, said Christine Decker, a SewGreen volunteer. The machines were oiled and refurbished, and volunteers compiled manufacturer information to make the machines as close to new as possible. “People can buy their machines, know that they’ve been cared for and then really know how to take care of it,” she said.

Whisman, whose grandmother was a seamstress, has made things like drapes and slipcovers for years but began experimenting with reusable gifts only recently, including at the Ithaca Festival this past summer. She said she sees making new gifts out of old materials as a challenge worth taking.

“You have to really look at what you have and think about what you make — it’s not like when you go to a store and buy a straight, four-foot piece of fabric,” she said. “It’s getting away from the ‘buy it and throw it away’ mentality.”

“It’s fun just watching,” Kramer said in response.

Twelve other vendors joined Whisman on fold-up tables in a single room, some of them crafting as shoppers tried to navigate reusable shopping bags and baby strollers through the aisles. Greeting cards, necklaces and sweaters lined the walls. Wenda Coburn sold mittens made from old sweaters, and blankets for toddlers made from receiving blankets and old quilts, with reused ribbon in colorful loops along the sides for the children to drag along behind them. “I’ve been sewing forever, so I thought, why not try this? It was something new,” she said.

Shopper Judy Kern said she heard about the fair from the human services listserv but had been following SewGreen’s events throughout the year — including a reusable fashion show at the Ithaca Farmer’s Market during the summer. She picked up felt mice toys for her cats and some hats for her sons, with plans to buy more as she continued through the room. “I just really appreciate the concept — making great, useable gifts in different ways,” she said.

The felt mice were some of Kate Sullivan’s best sellers, scattered at the end of her table in front of gift bags of different sizes. She said she continues to be surprised at the ways to use reusable materials in everyday items. “Felt, wool, silverware, clothes — its overwhelming. It’s different from going into a store and picking out a pattern — you have to think about what you can use and how you can use it. It’s different. You have to be more creative.”

Skinner said educating the community about reusable materials, especially the younger generation, is half the battle. And if Kramer’s four-year-old sister, Ella, was any indication, the fair was a success. Next to Whisman’s table, she began to tug a wool dress off of a nearby hanger. “I want to see if it fits,” she told her mother.

To learn more about SewGreen, visit www.sew-green.org.