

Helping Hands: Upcycling With Dual Purposes

[Miami-Dade Public Library System's Country Walk Branch](#)

Children

|

Tweens (10-12)

|

Teens

|

Young Adult

|

Adults

|

Intergenerational

Helping Hands: Upcycling With Dual Purposes

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Free



Byline

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Helping Hands is an arts and crafts program that meets the needs of two communities — older adults and homeless populations — at the same time. Older adult participants socialize at the library while they make sleeping mats from upcycled plastic bags. The mats are then given to nearby homeless populations.

Advanced Planning

This program has multiple goals: to upcycle plastic to keep it from landfills; to mitigate the loneliness often experienced by seniors; and to teach a population that they are valued through interactions with an easy, yet meaningful, craft. The simple activity helps to link neighborhoods that typically have little connection and lift the spirits of an underserved population through arts and crafts.

Before your program, you'll need to assemble the necessary supplies. Request donations of plastic bags, and then collect the following:

- One crochet needle per participant
- Containers to separate bags by color
- Containers for "plarn" (plastic yarn) balls
- Scissors

To make the plarn:

1. Lay a plastic bag flat and fold it in half lengthwise.
2. Fold bag in half again.
3. Cut folded bag into loops, discarding handles and bottom.
4. Knot loops together to form a single strand.
5. Roll the strand into a ball and crochet or knit as you would with yarn.

[View detailed instructions and diagrams of how to make plarn.](#)

Before your program, plan the mat's pattern and size. An average supermarket bag generates 12 pieces of plarn, and each piece of plarn makes four stitches. A mat is 17 stitches across and 140 rows, so each mat requires about 198 bags. [View a tutorial on crocheting the mats.](#)

Marketing

The Helping Hands program is in great demand. Word of mouth grew our program from one original teacher to 25 participants. The average weekly attendance is 12; however, even foreign visitors drop by to learn and take the skill back to their countries. We have had patrons from Peru, the Congo, the Philippines, and Haiti stop by and ask for instructions on how to make mats in order to bring the information to their countries to help their fellow countrymen.

The event was listed on an online library calendar and on the branch programming flier. Decorating the library with the mats prior to distribution creates buzz. Staff have also worked on making plarn at the customer service desk, and patrons took great interest.

Budgeting

This is a zero-cost program. Supplies are either donated or participants bring their own.

Day-of-event Activity

One staff person must show newbies the step-by-step process, and hands-on help also happens within side groups. Our branch expert has been able to create one mat in a week, inspiring others to keep working.

We've had the wonderful challenge of finding enough seats in our small branch.

Be patient because the task to create one's first mat is daunting, as 2,300 hand-cut strips are needed for one mat sized for an adult man. That said, a beginner's skill set generally starts out with plain, single-color mats, but quickly turns into plans for pieces that resemble beautiful Navajo or Seminole patterns. **(View photos under Slideshow at right.)**

Program Execution

The program started in September 2016 and continues today. We've grown bigger, with participants enjoying the get-together atmosphere, but also taking seriously the responsibility of creating something that is a necessary item for a fellow human being.

This is both a creative outlet and a social cause. The feedback has been so positive that there has been a ripple effect of patrons visiting and helping in the areas where the mats are distributed. Our original goal was 200 mats in three months. Nearly 100 were accomplished and distributed during the Christmas season of 2016.

We noticed non-users coming to the library, people who randomly stopped by because they were attracted by the colorful mats. Some patrons have wanted to buy these mats, and we channel their desire into becoming participants. As a result, our program attendance and circulation has ticked up, and participants have been inspired to share other artistic talents, like painting with fabric.

Advice

Give this project a try; you may be surprised at the results. At our library, friendships have blossomed. Patrons who admitted to being lonely and isolated now have a group and a shared purpose. Connections to blighted areas have been formed, and

some recipients of the mats are overwhelmed because these gifts were handmade with care and love.

Supporting Materials

[Download this Program as a PDF](#)

- Feedback (Coming Soon!)
- [Programming Librarian Facebook Group](#)

Slideshow Images





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