

Fine Cell Work and the Needlemakers

For many years, The Needlemakers has supported Fine Cell Work, the charity set up in 1997 to teach prisoners high quality needlework skills and now working in 31 prisons. The acquired skills, discipline and confidence help prepare prisoners for life and employment in the outside world, with a reduced chance of reoffending. Stitching to the required standard gives them a sense of pride and purpose. Post release there are a welcoming support group and volunteering opportunities. This led to the establishment of the successful post release workshop in Battersea in 2015 called the Hub. Here, suitable ex-offenders, now apprentices, can join accredited training programmes with an employment mentor.

Experienced volunteer stitchers now support 360 prisoners to create handmade products. They include stitched needlepoint and intricately embroidered cushions with a wide variety of designs including geometric, floral, children's and popular Shakespeare quotes.



Other items include table linen, bags, fabulous Christmas tree decorations and a variety of commissions and patchwork quilts. Stitchers use prepared kits in their cells with regular classes when permitted. For nine years I prepared and taught regular quilting classes at H.M.P. Wandsworth, but I now prepare the pre-cut kits with instructions for stitching. As no scissors are allowed in prisons, preparation must be exact. Empty dental floss packets are ideal for cutting thread but not fabric!

In the days leading up to lockdown, the staff, apprentices and volunteers rallied together to create 600 kits which were sent into prisons so that stitchers could keep occupied with purposeful activity over the coming months. Stitchers now in their cells for 23 hours a day have a lifeline, being able to work with the incentive of pay. A positive of the Covid-19 pandemic has been a greatly improved relationship with prison staff, as they are now distributing and returning work in the absence of volunteers. There is greater awareness of the benefits to mental wellbeing by having prisoners doing something positive with their time. Recently there has been a huge demand for classes in prisons.

With lockdown, the charity reduced its targets but, surprisingly, it has managed to surpass all expectations thanks to online sales. Despite the challenges, sales to the end of June 2020 were £74,000 compared with £90,000 for the same period in 2019. Earlier this year the charity's sale at Sotheby's was so successful that stitchers involved were given a bonus. This motivates and rewards hard work. Unfortunately, the scheduled sale at Middle Temple was postponed but they are hopeful about the autumn season and the annual Sloane Square Christmas sale. They are also excited about their pop-up shop with Pentreath & Hall interior designers in Bloomsbury on 12th - 24th October 2020.

The financial support of the Needleworkers is enormously appreciated and important but Fine Cell Work is not viable without sales and support. Stitchers have more than risen to the challenges Fine Cell Work has experienced in recent months. I encourage you to view their excellent website www.finecellwork.co.uk which will tell you more about the charity.

Ginny Stobart, July 2020