

BY Amy Spungen

Uptown Needle & CraftWorks

MIRACLE ON MAGAZINE STREET

The vibrant New Orleans blend of French, African, and American cultures, along with the city's welcoming atmosphere and casual lifestyle, attracts new residents every year. Such is the case with Emma Connolly, gracious co-owner with husband Robert of Uptown Needle & CraftWorks on bustling Magazine Street. Housed in an old shotgun-style space, crowded with all manner of fabrics, fibers, and notions, the shop has a timeless feel, though Emma has been a New Orleans resident for just four years.

Quilters and sewists love the array of fabrics at Uptown Needle & CraftWorks, but Emma says it's the workshops and private classes that keep this shop afloat. "My business plan was that the classes would be the main revenue stream," said Emma. "Quilt shops cannot survive on fabric sales alone; there isn't enough markup to make a profit." Upcoming classes at Uptown include string quilting, improv embroidery, beginner knitting, and a shibori indigo workshop.

One of Emma's greatest joys is teaching youngsters to sew, and her children's classes are among her most popular. "It resonates in a big way when children make something with their hands," said Robert, and his wife nodded in agreement.

New Orleans colors find a home inside Uptown Needle & CraftWorks.





ABOVE, L-R: Shop owner Emma Connolly; staffer Kelly Couch. OPPOSITE: Emma was inspired by a Gee's Bend workshop to make colorful quilt in 2017.

Mapping out a new life

How Emma ended up here, committed to both nurturing the people who enter her shop and keeping it viable so she can keep offering a community-gathering place, is quite a story — one that Emma shared in an essay published last year in *A Second Blooming: Becoming the Women We Are Meant to Be*, a collection of writing by women considering “the second half of life.”

The story is not an easy one: Emma left an abusive marriage and battled catastrophic illness (meningitis and encephalitis simultaneously) while caring for her three children. She found herself rethinking traditional expectations of women. While living in Memphis she eventually met and married Robert, who encouraged her to explore new avenues. Emma became an Episcopal deacon,

specializing in counseling.

In 2014, while visiting her grown daughter in New Orleans, Emma rounded a corner and saw a For Sale sign in front of an empty house that had been converted into a commercial space. Something about the building spoke to Emma, and in a spontaneous move, she took a risk. Within a week, she had signed a lease and quit her previous job. She moved into the back of her new shop and lived there on her own until 2016, when Frank retired from his job as an anthropology professor at the University of Memphis and joined her in New Orleans. Though the couple moved into a house, most days Emma may be found in her fiber-art oasis, guiding her staff, working behind the counter, or leading a workshop.

A quilt picked up
at Tulane University
is a glamour shot





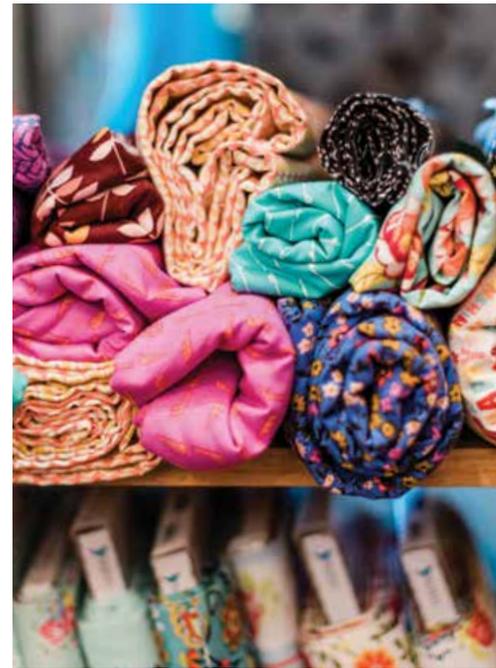
unny classroom.

Outside, stitch all day

On a recent sunny afternoon, as the aroma of warm pastries from the next-door bakery followed us up the stairs and across the threshold, a hum of conversation was heard from the back room. Past all the shelves of cloth, skeins of yarn, and the shop's crowded counter, six women gathered around a table in the shop's workroom. Each workshop participant gently smoothed a whole-cloth top, printed with a map of New Orleans, across an expanse of backing fabric. The women helped each other prepare their quilts for sewing, one top at a time. At the end of Emma's workshop, each quilter will bring home her marked, basted quilt.

Most of the women that day planned to formalize their project by embroidering local

landmarks, such as St. Stephen Church at the corner of Napoleon and Camp Streets in the Garden District. "My great-grandmother was the first baby ever baptized there, and it's where my grandparents were married," said student Heidi Porter. She wasn't the only one with a connection to St. Stephen. "I was baptized there just last year," said Betsy Gray. "I was married there in 2011," laughed Amanda LeBoeuf. The trio hadn't met before, but now they were chatting like old friends. That's how Emma feels a community of quilters is supposed to come together at Uptown Needle & CraftWorks. These kinds of moments are one way, she said, "to elevate the humble thread to an art form by participating in the act of creation in the community."



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Let the good times and the fabric roll; Emma says the New Orleans Street Map quilt, designed by Uptown Needle & CraftWorks, is a hit with students; when basting, many hands make light work.





ABOVE: Emma and Robert. OPPOSITE: Mardi Gras beads hang from the tree and the magic word — “Fabric” — hangs from the shop.

“I love the relaxing, almost meditative quality to [stitching]. Hands-on experiences are underrated in these digital days.”

— ROBERT CONNOLLY

“Get in here and make something!” demands Uptown Needle & CraftWorks’ website mischievously. If shop traffic is any indication, people are following instructions. The afternoon of our visit, quilters wandered in with projects to work on, and Emma explained that the shop has open drop-in three days each week. “You can sit outside on the porch and stitch all day if you want to,” she said. And who wouldn’t want to do just that — enjoying a sweet breeze in the warm sunshine, jasmine in bloom out front, while chatting with fellow quilters? Emma added that although this group was local, some “regulars” hang out in the shop just once a year: when their husbands attend annual conventions. The shop’s Magazine Street location brings in a lot of local and tourist foot traffic too.

Robert is embroidering his own New Orleans

map quilt. “I’m not terribly talented, but I love the relaxing, almost meditative quality to [stitching],” he said. “Hands-on experiences are underrated in these digital days.”

The former Memphians are confident that their move to the Big Easy was the right one to make. “New Orleans has been such a nurturing place for people who love the shop,” said Robert. Emma laughs. “Someone said, ‘It’s like a bar without the alcohol.’ When the door opened and more people started coming inside, Emma headed off to greet them.

As she summed up in her essay, “My hope is that today are to nourish individuals with the grace and joy of community through being together in collaboration, creativity, and celebration.”

Amen.