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Pillows become artistic business opportunity

The soft hum of the sewing machine beats a steady rhythm amid the background noise of music playing and people chatting while working on their art projects.

Colored pieces of fabric roll through the machine as the needle pierces the cloth and a perfectly straight stitch connects the pieces.

Within minutes, a colorful shape emerges, ready for stuffing and the final steps needed to create a custom pillow for a waiting customer.

Michael Downam has found a place he likes. He is building a reputation as a pillowmaker at Carey Services' Creative Hearts Art Studio.

"This is wonderful," Downam said recently while sitting in front of the sewing machine he uses to create his pillows. "I've found something I like to do. Pillows are my thing, I guess."

It all started rather innocently. Downam has been a Carey Services for many years. Much of that time, he has worked in the production facility on various jobs. He started participating in the Creative Hearts programming when it began in October.

"We have a lot of fun when Mike's here," said Jackie Dickerson, one of the studio's lead instructors. "He's participated in a lot of things, but when we started doing pillows, that's something that he just really connected with."

To use a phrase more connected to the business world, you could say Downam's entrepreneurial venture has had a somewhat soft launch. And, when you're in the pillow-making business, soft is a good word.

Downam's first pillow was a gift for a family member. The pillow with a big fire truck on it was a big hit. Since then, he's been expanding his pillow repertoire.

"Sometimes people will know what they want on a pillow, and sometimes I just find something I haven't done before and make it," Downam said. "It's been fun being creative."

He's quickly developing a bit of a following.

One pillow design, a patriotic flag-based motif, has already been bought by three people and he's got a couple more on backorder. In all, he's got 15 pillows of various designs on backorder.

Not only is his business growing, he's developing additional skills, too.

When he first began making the pillows, he painted the designs on the fabric and art studio staff members assembled the pillow. That's gradually changing.

"It's been great watching him not only create the pillows, but also see him develop skills in making them," Dickerson said. "Mike's now sewing the pillow seams by himself while we help him with some of the assembly on his designs. We've got him pretty comfortable sewing straight lines, and we're going to keep working on the more intricate parts."

Most typical sewing machines use a foot pedal to control the speed at which the machine stitches. Staff members were able to find a machine that has a hand-operated speed control, allowing Downam to begin learning how to feed fabric in a straight line at a speed he is comfortable with.

He's also gotten more comfortable promoting his business. He's on Facebook, and he recently got a supply of business cards he's been handing out to people in the community. Word is starting to get out.

"Things are picking up," he said with a chuckle. "I have a waiting list, which means I guess I need to get busy and make pillows a little bit faster."

After saying that, he put his head down and started running a piece of fabric through the sewing machine. Pillows don't make themselves, after all.

For information about Mike's pillows, contact Carey Services.