

“Plarn” mats turn trash into better rest for homeless man

After a week of trying out the first bag mat made by volunteers at the Grayville Senior Center in Grayville, Illinois, Alan Stichweh noted, “I sleep better with it. I don’t toss and turn like I used to because it’s easier on my joints.”

A bag mat is a three by six foot sleeping mat made by crocheting “plarn” (or plastic yarn) cut from shopping bags. Bags that often become trash are recycled into a portable, light-weight mat that can help a person who is homeless on the streets sleep better.

Dottie Isbell, a Grayville resident, heard about the bag mat project from her daughter Kathi Isbell, who has been working in recent years with nonprofits in Evansville, Indiana, to help end homelessness and poverty.

Kathi had found an online video (<http://vimeo.com/4887139>) from Lutheran Church Charities in Chicago and designed a how-to brochure for the project, then passed the instructions on to her mom.



(L to R) Dottie Isbell, Marcella Sweeney, Mary Handel, & Norma Armstrong make and crochet “plarn” or plastic yard from shopping bags

After learning how to make and crochet plarn into a mat, Dottie took the idea to the Grayville Senior Center. Norma Armstrong, Mary Handel, and Marcella Sweeney became involved in the folding, cutting, tying, and rolling of the plarn.

“I’m from a large family and over the years we have had a helping hand a time or two,” related Sweeney. “It makes me feel good when I can give back.”

Meanwhile, Dottie would crochet at the center with the group and at home. She uses an ice cream



bucket with a hole in the lid to contain the plarn while doing a single crochet with a #10 hook. Several hours went into the production of one mat.



Alan Stichweh received the first bag mat to try out under his sleeping bag as he sleeps outside while currently homeless.

Several months after the Grayville ladies completed their first bag mat, Kathi met Stichweh, who attended a presentation she led through her job. She learned of his homeless situation through conversations with him.

For several months, Stichweh has been homeless in Evansville after losing a well-paying job in another part of Indiana. He’s tried the men’s shelters and yet often sleeps out on the streets. He continues to look for work that can sustain him and help him afford housing once again.

Isbell offered the bag mat to Stichweh, who accepted it and gave permission to share his photo, name, and comments.

He said the mat “worked really well” and when it “got wet, it dried out quickly.” He commented that they “made it about the right length. The size is good for an average body.”

Stichweh appreciated the padding and cushion the bag mat provided as he slept. “On the concrete, it helps on your shoulders and hips, and back.”

The ladies also crocheted a strap for tying the mat after it’s rolled. Stichweh said the strap made it easy to carry and affirmed, “It’s good for the environment.”

The bag mat project has already inspired other features and other individuals to involve others.

Mary Handel had mentioned the project at the church she attends and Barbara Higginson, of Grayville too, was motivated to go to the Senior Center and learn to make plarn. She's now working on a bag mat at home.

Stichweh had ideas of enhancements to the bag mat. He wondered if a pillow could be made, with an open end, allowing other bags to be used for stuffing and for carrying things at other times. Dottie Isbell is working out a way to make a bag pillow based on his idea.

In reflecting on being involved with making bag mats, Dottie said she "really enjoyed getting together to work on it and visiting while we did." She also expressed, "I really like that somebody is making good use of it."

Handel said, "I think it's good anytime we can help those in need. It was good to fellowship with each other while working on the mat."

For a brochure on how to make plarn and bag mats, send a self-addressed/stamped envelope to Kat Kreaions, PO Box 2555, Evansville, IN 47728 or email katkreaions82@aol.com with "bag mats" in the subject line, or download it from <https://acrobat.com/#d=yzhlvTMdcaXjfaer3Wnng>

Start a bag mat project yourself: 1) Find a homeless service provider who can connect your mats with those who can most use them; 2) Recruit team members for the various tasks; 3) Gather several regular-size plastic bags—even if there are holes; 4) Work together to CUT the bags, LINK the loops, ROLL the plarn, and/or CROCHET the bags into bag mats; 5) GIVE the bag mats away.

You'll be doing good for the environment and for others in need. Armstrong would agree, "I think it is a good deal to help anyone out. I would do it anytime for anyone."



Mary Handel ties two pieces loops cut from a plastic bag to create "plarn" (plastic yarn).



Norma Armstrong cuts plastic bags into sections that will form loops used in making plarn



Marcella Sweeney rolls the plarn into balls to make it easier to handle during the crocheting process