

UNIQUE TEDDY BEARS USE RECYCLED MATERIALS

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Erica Pennington/Beloit Daily News Each of Susan M
This bear uses two different types of fur so that it loo



BELOIT — You were truly someone if you had a beautiful garment of squirrel or mink.

Nowadays, though, it's more likely that grandma's prized stole is slowly falling apart in the closet.

"Fur needs to be converted into something people want now," said artist Susan McLoughlin. "There's no coming back for the fur industry."

McLoughlin used to be a furrier — a person who makes, repairs and cleans fur garments. After leaving the business, McLoughlin got creative with unwanted pelts at her disposal by starting "Teddy's Fur U," a custom stuffed animal business that recycles furs by turning them into lovable little friends.

"It took six months for me to make the first bear, but after lots of practice I got a lot better at it," McLoughlin said. "My mother said I should make a business out of it."

Born and raised in Beloit, it was McLoughlin's talent for creating costumes and clothing that took her on a coast-to-coast journey after college.

Eventually she ended up in New York City, where she worked at a facility that cared for thousands of fur coats, including some that cost upwards of \$100,000.

"I started in costumes, but I enjoyed furs because it was like 3-D chess...you have to learn every animal and how to work with every one," McLoughlin said.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the fur industry took a dive as animal rights activists began to become more vocal and active against fur in fashion.

"PETA started throwing blood on ladies wearing coats and they became afraid to wear furs," McLoughlin said. "After that I decided to leave New York."

Coming back to Beloit was tough professionally. There wasn't a big demand for furriers, so

McLoughlin began working retail and created her Teddy bears on the side.

In the 1990s and 2000s word of mouth had spread about her special bears. They were so popular that a downtown Beloit workshop was rented and a staff was hired to keep up with demand.

“Back when we were working downtown, it almost got to be not fun anymore because we were burned out,” McLoughlin said.

Although she is now retired, McLoughlin can still almost always be found working away on a new creation using her old but trusty Bonis Fur Machine.

“It’s fun again for me,” she said. “I also make things out of other types of materials including things like old shirts.”

The process of making Teddy bears — and even a few unique creatures like a kangaroo made out of kangaroo — takes about three or four hours if conditions are perfect.

Others require a bit more love. It is common for one fur to have what is considered to be “good” and “bad” patches of material to work with.

“Some of these furs are over 100 years old but they’re still usable,” McLoughlin said.

McLoughlin has no idea how many stuffed animals she has made over the years, but estimates that it would number somewhere in the 200,000 range.

Bears have been made in every pattern, shape and size imaginable. McLoughlin even helped her nephew create a special Teddy that was 6-feet-tall to give his girlfriend.

“Bears make people happy,” she said. “They don’t have to be a certain size or made of any particular material because people just have an affinity for them.”

With piles of pelts still calling McLoughlin's basement home, she said that there's really no end in sight for the business, and that is all right.

"I want to make sure that those animals are used wisely and made into something beautiful that people will cherish," she said.

McLoughlin typically makes Teddy bears ranging from 6 inches to 30 inches tall with movable arms and legs. Small and medium bears cost \$60. Large bears cost \$75. The price has remained the same for over 30 years. For more information visit www.teddysfuru.com.