

Somerset Friends Named Top Knitting Designers In Nation

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"We were so happy we couldn't sleep," recalled Shanta Moitra when describing her own and the feelings of her best friend, Jodi Berkebile, after they learned their knitting designs were chosen as number one in the nation. Shanta had designed and hand-knitted the winning men's sweater, while Jodi had done the same to win the women's best designed sweater. For Shanta, it was her second successive national title. It was the first for Jodi.

Putting the frosting on the cake, to use a cliché, was the triple honor Shanta received when her sweater also took the People's Choice and Best of Show awards, at the St. Louis National Design Competition held in March by the Knitting Guild of America.

"We were roommates," says Shanta. "We finally turned on CNN to get to sleep," she said, bringing forth a chorus of spontaneous laughter from the others sitting with her. (Jodi, sitting nearby confirmed that the Cable News Network subject matter was dull enough to help them get drowsy.)

Jodi's winning design was a beautiful, artistically designed, mohair creation with raised pink flowers. Muted blues and greens were used for the background and the leaves and stems of the flowers.

Shanta's sweater is now being modeled and professionally photographed for publication in Cast-On, the national knitting magazine. The sweater is a geometric masterpiece that combines all manner of shapes, diamonds, zigzags, and circles, done in a strong black and white color scheme.

Both winners learned to knit at a young age. Shanta was about six when her mother taught her to knit. "It was a matter of survival," she said since she grew up near the Himalayan Mountains where woolen stockings, gloves, sweaters and shawls were needed for protection from the cold weather.

Jodi learned to knit when her mother taught a Girl Scout troop the craft. "I wasn't really interested

and I didn't do anything with knitting until four years ago when a friend wanted to learn to knit," she said. Eventually, Jodi joined the knitting guild and has been knitting ever since.

According to the competition rules, designers can have another person do the knitting. These gals prefer to do their own knitting. Good technical and mathematical skills are required to correctly figure the amounts and types of stitches needed to construct a professional-looking garment.

Jodi questions why a person would go to all the trouble to design a sweater, yet lack the ability to knit it.

"I don't see how you could design something and not feel able to knit it yourself," she says.

Both women are obviously meticulous about their craftsmanship. "If you are going to put your time into it," says Jodi, "You want it to last."

Adds Shanta, "If a knitter doesn't know good finishing techniques, the sweater will look homemade. We want our sweaters to look 'handmade,' not 'homemade.'"

The women use only natural fiber yarns, shunning the synthetics, saying that the natural fibers will last a lifetime. Much of what they use is imported.

Another qualification for entering the national competition is membership in a knitting guild. Shanta and Jodi belong to two guilds. One is the Laurel Highlands Knitting Guild in Ligonier. The other is the Roof Garden Knitting Guild in Somerset, of which Jodi is the president. The downside of this honor, she says, is that while she is conducting the meeting, all the other members sit around knitting. Her own fingers just itch to grab needle and yarn and get to work. These gals declare that, once begun, knitting is addictive and you won't want to quit.

Where a knitter finds inspiration for a new design? Jodi says it can pop up anywhere. It might come from seeing an unfamiliar stitch or design which can give birth to a new idea.

Three years ago the pair met at the local knitting guild meeting. In

the other, each recognized a kindred spirit. Both are homemakers, but out of their shared love of knitting has blossomed a close bond of friendship.

A native of India, Shanta is the perfect foil for her fairer-complexioned friend, Jodi. At the ceremonial awards night in St. Louis, Shanta put aside western dress in favor of wearing her native Indian sari of vivid green.

"If you join a guild," says Shanta, "you already know knitting." However, both women say that the more they know, the more they realize they don't know about knitting.

The sweater designing skills of both women are being sought by prestigious magazine publishers who search for new talent.

Shanta says her filial duties would conflict with becoming a professional designer. The mother of teenagers—son, Vivek, 16, and daughter Alika, 14 - Shanta said that she may consider going professional when the extra-curricular activities of her children have abated. Because her husband, Dr. Shomendra Moitra, is the director of Emergency Services at the local hospital, he is extremely busy; therefore, he is unable to accompany the children as often as he would enjoy going with them. Shanta feels a strong parental commitment to support them by attending their activities. She is also a registered nurse.

Jodi, on the other hand, has already had three of her original sweater designs accepted by McCall's magazine. They will appear in the needlework and crafts issue coming out later this year. She says, "If somebody pays me for my hobby — that's great!"

A college romance brought about Jodi's marriage to Guy Berkebile. Their two children are Garrett, 6, and Lindsay, 3. Guy and his mother operate the Berkebile Oil Co. in Somerset.

When Jodi earned her college degree in finance, she little dreamed her bent for numbers would be most used to figure inches and stitches for sweater designs.

Serving her guests with an unpretentious grace, Shanta shares a bit about her country. She says the northerners and southerners of India each speak a separate language. Her husband comes from the south and she comes from the north. He can speak both languages, but his family and Shanta cannot. Since the second language in India is English, which is taught in the schools, Shanta and her husband's family must converse in English. She says this is a problem. She would like for all the people in her country to share the same Indian tongue and be fully able to communicate with one another.

Excitement is already mounting for the women since the 1993 knitting convention will be held in Pittsburgh at the Vista Hotel. Next year's convention is set for Sacramento which is a discouraging 3,000 miles away. Yet, there's a bright spot about the Sacramento affair. A member of the local guild, Marie Kieffer, from the Somerset County Extension Service will teach a class there. For Shanta and Jodi, this is nearly as good as if the honor belonged to one of them.

Another guild member, Peggy Black, will teach buttonhole and button band construction at an



Jodi, shown in the Moitra livingroom, is seated with her knitting supplies.



Dark-haired Shanta holds her last year's national men's design winning sweater. Jodi is holding her sweater which won this year's best women's design.

August seminar in Philadelphia.

To make knitted garments last, take proper care of them say the women. "Never hang them." The garment should be carefully folded and stored in a cedar chest or a box. Hand laundering should be done at least once a year. Give the same gentle care to storing the

unused yarn. Although Shanta and Jodi say that they know better, they confess to the knitter's sin of buying more yarn than they need and having to store it. It can easily happen when they shop at Kathy's Kreations in Ligonier and spy a new imported yarn or perhaps an irresistible new color.



"This is only some of it," says Shanta, somewhat guiltily, as she pulls out stored yarn which she bought on impulse knowing it is best to buy only what you need for the job.

Homestead Notes



Shanta Moitra's sweater received the People's Choice and Best of Show awards at the St. Louis National Design Competition sponsored by the Knitting Guild of America.