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PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Teacher Dilys Tong helps student Rachel Bu, 16, at a sewing
class for teens at the Sew Be It Studio on Yonge. St.

From quick repairs to fancy threads, GTA residents learn it all

Apr 16, 2009 04:30 AM

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BARBARA TURNBULL

LIVING REPORTER

Sewing classes are bursting at the seams across the GTA.

From home studios to sparkingly modern facilities, adults and teenagers alike are flocking to where stitching machines are buzzing.

"Were full, we're happy," says Sewing World manager Teresa Locicero.

Until six months ago, there was a month-long gap between each five-week beginner session at the

Danforth studio, but demand now has them teaching constantly.

"We have eight new students every (sixth) Sunday afternoon wanting to learn to sew," she says.

There was no post-Christmas slowdown at The Workroom, on Queen St. W., this year, where classes are being continually added to accommodate interest, says owner Karyn Valino.

At The Sewing Studio, on Avenue Rd., they've increased the number of classes, added a second location in Pickering and are preparing videotaped online courses, says founder Denise Wilde.

Beginner classes are the most popular and there is something for everyone, including a course for men or couples.

Theatrical costumes are produced by day at Yonge St.'s Sew Be It Studio, but classes take over at night and on weekends, says Dylis Tong. Demand is increasing generally, but youth, driven by fashion, is her fastest-growing segment.

What's happening to a society where lack of time was the most common complaint?

The bad economy is bringing back interest and habits from leaner times, like clipping coupons and following sales. Crafts fit perfectly into the trend. And sewing combines creativity with function and a good dose of fun, fans say.

There are options for private lessons, but group classes of two- or three-hour sessions generally last five to eight weeks and cost \$150 to \$300.

There are also one-day workshops and week-long boot camps.

Some newbies are looking for basic skills only, so they can do their own alterations; some want to wear what they make or customize outfits for a hard-to-fit shape.

Others want to create their own designs. Home decor items, such as curtains, pillows and linens, are popular.

"I was always interested in creating something unique for myself or others," says Sonya Elwell, who starts her first class at Sew Be It this month.

"I don't do a lot of things that express creativity and I think sewing will give me that."

Sewing is a useful way to kill time, Tong says, noting some of her students have been laid off and need help filling the void.

"It's something fun they can do and ... take with them," she says. "I find now with the recession a lot of adults ... want to learn a new skill ... (and sewing) is a skill you can always use."

Locicero says Sewing World sees many new immigrants, who want to pick up a skill that may lead to employment.

It's also a money saver.

"You can spend \$80 on a pillow or you can buy the material for under \$20," Tong says.

Simple patterns are made beautiful with the right fabric and projects don't have to be time consuming.

"While you're watching *Survivor* you can make ... a really nice summer skirt for \$10," she says.

"There is a revival of all the old skills," says Pat Gillespie, who teaches children in her home studio after school.

Gillespie recently said goodbye to a 20-year career in the design world. Last November, her daughter, along with some of her schoolmates, asked for sewing lessons.

Gillespie's been teaching a class for girls ages 8 to 13 since, with one rolling into the next. She's about to start a class for the parents of those girls, so they can be troubleshooters at home.

"They're really skills everyone should know," she says, adding even the simple task of sewing on a button is a mystery to many. "It's something boys should know as well."

She's had boys interested in learning, but they want their own class and currently her hands are full with the girls.

Watching beginners get it is a great part of the job, Locicero says.

"It's a lot of fun to see their faces as they learn to use the sewing machine."

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