

By Carolyn Trietsch

## Crafting social ties

**O**n Thursday nights, the yarn comes out. Every week, my fellow entomology graduate students and I get together to make insect-inspired crafts. One crochets butterflies, another makes earrings out of wings from discarded research specimens, and a third decoupages notebooks with figures and illustrations from journal articles thrown out after a lab cleanup. It may sound light or frivolous, but it's far from it. A regular social night like this—whether built around crafts or some other shared interest—can make a significant difference in our work and our lives.

The catalyst for starting craft night was the death of a friend and fellow student in the department. Following that tragedy, I started to crochet bumble bees for his family and friends in memory of him and his research. Crocheting allowed me to create something that I could give others and help comfort them, and I think it helped comfort me as well. Fashioning bees for others rather than sitting idle helped me work through my grief.

I continued to crochet bumble bees long after, and I was surprised when other students asked me to teach them how to crochet. I found out that many students in the department enjoyed crafting. After talking, we finally gathered one evening at a friend's house, where I attempted to teach 10 people how to crochet at once. There was yarn and knots and chaos, but enough people wanted to stick with it that we planned a second night so that they could finish the bees they started.

That second craft night, an experienced crafter wanted to try something new—making earrings out of insect wings. She pulled out a bag of iridescent beetle wings that shimmered green, red, and blue in the light. Immediately, everyone wanted to learn how to turn them into earrings, too. We continued to meet, and as more people brought new projects, craft night evolved into a weekly social event.

Now, 2 years in, craft night is open to everyone to do whatever they wish, crafting or not. One attendee uses the time to curate his personal beetle collection, which numbers more than 12,000 specimens so far. Another comes to socialize and catch up with students in other labs. Sometimes friends and spouses join us. We've also received support from others in the department. The Entomology Graduate Student Association has given us funding to purchase crafting supplies, and professors have given us Tupperware containers full of discarded research specimens, including monarch



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butterflies and spotted lanternflies—the makings of our earrings.

We've crafted so much that we've started to sell our handiwork at events, including the Entomological Society of America's annual meeting and The Great Insect Fair, a yearly event for scientists and the public hosted by our department. The proceeds help support graduate student events in the department, such as professional development seminars and socials.

I think craft night supports graduate students in other ways as well. It goes without saying that graduate school is immensely stressful and has become a breeding ground for mental health problems. But social events such as craft nights can go a long way toward helping graduate

students cope with stress and build camaraderie with their fellow students. I've gained new friends and grown closer to them by teaching them my skills and asking them to teach me theirs. New students have used craft night to connect with more senior students and ask for help and advice about transitioning into graduate school. One student commented that craft night has made her feel more welcome in our department and university.

The benefits also extend to our research. At craft night, students have formed new research collaborations and come up with ideas for new projects together. One student works so closely with students from another lab—whom she connected with at craft night—that they now consider her an honorary member of their lab.

With my defense date approaching, I don't know exactly what my future holds. But I know that craft night will continue to grow and metamorphose in the hands of future entomology students. ■

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