

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 2**  
From the Board
- 3**  
Headquarters Report
- 4**  
Chapter News & Views
- 10**  
Sew 'n Share: Batiks
- 12**  
Sew 'n Share:  
Tips for Perfect Trousers
- 14**  
Sew for the Gold:  
Make It... in Wool
- 16**  
Meet the ASG Award Winners
- 20**  
ASG Conference 2001
- 22**  
Book Beat
- 24**  
Book Briefs
- 26**  
Product Previews
- 28**  
Industry Insider
- 33**  
Sewing Hall of Fame
- 34**  
Regional Roundup
- 35**  
Viewpoint: My Ideal Companion
- 36**  
Chapter Calendar
- 39**  
Index of Resources
- 40**  
Members Only

American Sewing Guild  
**Notions**

## For the Love of Sewing

*Editor's note: Nancy Zieman, recipient of the 2001 Sewing Hall of Fame Award, was the keynote speaker at the first general session of ASG Conference 2001. We are pleased to be able to share her message with the entire ASG membership.*

**E**ach of us who sews has a tale to tell... a tale about how we started and why we sew. Many of us may have the same beginnings... perhaps a mother or grandmother who gave us the nudge... or maybe it was a 4-H leader, Girl Scout leader, a home ec class... or perhaps you've recently started to sew as the result of a friend, a magazine article, a television program. But I believe the question of why we sew is the most interesting one. If we are 400 strong in this room, there are 400 interesting stories about why we do this. Obviously, because we are here, we love it. The love of sewing runs through our veins. That's what makes for interesting bonds. People from all walks of life use their hands to create, whether it's to create garments, quilts, embroidery... it doesn't matter. You can feel the excitement when you talk to someone who has the same interest in creating.



I thought I'd take just a few minutes to tell you my story. I call it "the love of sewing is our common thread." Maybe my thread isn't all-purpose polyester. Maybe it's a thread with a few slubs, a few twists, and a few turns. Perhaps your story is somewhat similar. I've heard lots of stories about me... and the stories are sometimes more interesting than the truth. You may prefer to believe what you hear elsewhere, but this is what it is all about.

I grew up in a rural part of Wisconsin as the daughter of dairy farmers. I started sewing at 10. My mom was the 4-H leader. Safe surroundings; humble beginnings.

Probably the most common question my friends get (because people don't want to ask me directly) is "What happened to Nancy?" The story is very simple. Obviously, God didn't give me a very even smile. I should be the last person to be on public television or perhaps any television. When I was 18 months old, I got an ear infection. I have Bell's palsy and a damaged nerve on the right side of my face. I remember reading someplace that they thought the Mona Lisa's smile was a result of Bell's palsy. When I read that, I thought "Hey, I'm in great company!" But, as a child, this was traumatic. I was really insecure and withdrawn. Then I learned to sew. I was good at something. It was very therapeutic for me. And I slowly, slowly came out of my shell.

I get letters from people around the country who have similar maladies and I make appropriate referrals. I think this is part of my mission in life—to help others who may be in similar situations. You know, our bodies are packages. We may have pretty packages. We may have plain packages. We may have burned up packages, tattered packages. But, really, when you take off the package, you want to know what's inside. Everyone, I'm confident, has a slight paralysis. It may not be of their face or their body. It may be something in

(continued on page 30)



## For the Love of Sewing

(continued from page 1)

their life that they wish they didn't have. But keep in mind that it gives us character, it gives us growth.

I have a degree in clothing and textiles from University of Wisconsin, Stout. After college, I worked at Minnesota Fabrics (which is now Hancock Fabrics) in Chicago. We had to give a new seminar every week. That was really something! My first one was on suede, the second one was on quilting, and the third one was on fitting pants. It was intense. I learned a lot in those first eight weeks! And I remember doing the quilting one and thinking "This is going to be a short-lived thing." Boy, did I eat my words!

After Minnesota Fabrics, I worked for a sewing machine dealer, then for the Sew Fit Company, and then my husband—who I met when he was a manager at Minnesota Fabrics—was transferred to Virginia, Minnesota. That was a very fortuitous move. In the iron range of Minnesota, I didn't have a job. So I decided to give sewing seminars. People would ask where to get the products I demonstrated and I sent them to their local fabric store. Then one day I thought, "There's something wrong with that, Nancy!" I pasted up an 8½" x 11" sheet of paper and got a post office box. That little sheet of paper had five books, a Dritz hem gauge, and a Simplex gauge for buttonholes. I still carry these last two today.

When I started to get orders, I had to find the UPS office. In this northern area, I couldn't find it. But I knew that at 4:00pm, the UPS trucks went back to their terminal. I found a truck and followed it. Nancy's Notions was born.

Later on, we were transferred to Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, my husband's hometown. I worked out of the basement of my house and my mother-in-law became my first employee. About three

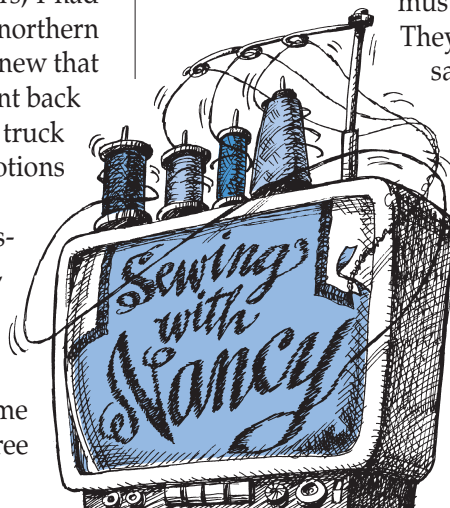
months later, my father-in-law started to come to work with her and he still, to this day, lends an occasional helping hand. I've been very blessed in both my nuclear family and my extended family.

In 1981, I was asked to do a pilot for cable television. At that time, there were only 3 million people in the United States who got cable television. I did this pilot as a fluke. It took 13 hours to tape the first program—and it is blackmail material! How I ever stayed on is a wonder. I did 11 shows and then the person I was in partnership with left. I had a three-month-old baby and I didn't think I could continue by myself. Then one night, I woke up in a cold sweat and thought "If you don't do this, you're never going to have the opportunity again."

The next morning, I got on the phone and talked to some independent production people. I contracted with the Satellite Program Network, which is no longer in existence, for three months. They kind of laughed at me...but they needed programming! My first three months were extended to six months, and the rest is history.

When they put the show on Saturday morning, things progressed. I went on to Tempo Television, then The Learning Channel, then Public Television, where I've been for 15 of my 19 years. My first underwriter was Pfaff. I'm very, very grateful to them. They have never said "You

must show this." They have always said "Nancy, whatever you think is appropriate... be our guest." I also have a whole list of under-



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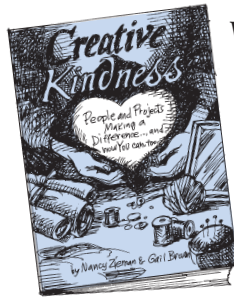
## For the Love of Sewing

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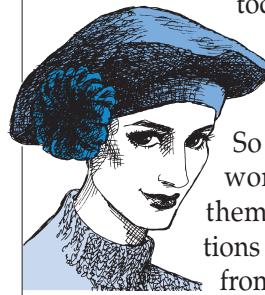
writers who have been equally supportive. Gingher has been with me 16 years. *Sew News*, *Amazing Designs*, *Madeira Threads*, and *Prym Dritz*—I'm really blessed to have such a wonderful lineup of supporters.

People think television is glamorous, but it's just my classroom. I teach there. As of last count, I've done 487 shows. We do 26 half-hour shows a year. We tape 12 months of the year. Each TV script is 27 minutes and 45 seconds long and each segment is timed out. We practice each segment, then we roll tape. If I don't get it right, we keep doing it until it is right. My openings must be 45 seconds long. About ten years ago, I didn't script them. The record for one opening is 27 tries. Today, I script them.

One of the most touching series that I've done in these 19 years was called "Sew a Smile." I taped this program in 1998. The idea was generated by a letter from a lady in Rhinelander, Wisconsin telling me about her group called "Open Your Heart to Haiti." They sew uniforms for children in Haiti. Without a uniform, these kids can't go to school. Unless they go to school, they cannot get breakfast or dinner. We received 20,000 requests for information after airing that series. The letters and requests kept coming in. I realized that a TV show wasn't enough. So my good friend Gail Brown and I wrote a book called "Creative Kindness."



We compiled these stories, plus patterns and projects for people to sew either as a group or individually. If you go to the home page of my Web site and click on the Creative Kindness icon, you'll find lists of groups that need help, plus an interchange so we can post your group. We also post projects.



Sixty percent of the requests we get today are on berets or head coverings for people going through hair loss. So Gail designed a wonderful beret for them. Complete directions can be downloaded from this site.

Now, telling you in the American Sewing Guild about sewing for others is like preaching to the choir. You do it already: cancer caps, neonatal coverings, preemie clothes, on and on. All those things that you do for others in your guild have very positive effects. I encourage you in your love of sewing...or quilting...or embroidery—whatever is your passion. And this year, I encourage you make at least one thing for someone that you'll never meet.

The love of sewing is our common thread. I've been honored to share this with you in the 23 years of Nancy's Notions. I appreciate all the times I've had with you. Hopefully, there will be a few more together. Thanks so much!