

Knowing How to Fold 'Em



At left: Jeremy Shafer (center) shows Preston Williams and Barbara Contos how to fold an origami broken heart at the Bay Area Rapid Folders meeting at Bernal Height Library. Above: Kim Hughes has a collection of origami cranes made by youths at the Napa Boys and Girls Club. The cranes will be strung together and eventually become part of a larger piece.

Bernal Heights origami club set stage for Bay Area in making art from bits of paper, a few creases

They share a love for paper and an even greater love for what their dexterous fingers can make that paper become: an elegant pink rhododendron, a sleek golden dragon, a wide gray elephant's butt.

They're dedicated paper folders who gather on the first Saturday of every month, huddling around wooden tables in the basement of the Bernal Heights Library in San Francisco to create tiny origami concoctions. They call themselves BARF (for Bay Area Rapid Folders). Their motto? "We fold until we get nauseous and then we fold some more."

By Heather Knight
 CHRONICLE
 STAFF WRITER

"This is beautiful," said BARF's leader, Jeremy Shafer, 27, of Berkeley, as he surveyed his comrades folding away at this month's meeting. "When we're in the company of like persuasions, it's very satisfying. We don't feel as strange, for one."

Those who love origami -- recreational paper folding that dates back to 17th century Japan -- can just about fill their Saturdays with club meetings around the Bay

Area. In addition to BARF, there's San Jose's League of Intrepid Paper Sculptors (LIPS), Pacifica's Peninsula Origami People (POP), and the Napa and Sonoma Valley Paperfolders, which unfortunately has no cute acronym.

Kelly Dunn, 32, of Napa, formed the North Bay club last month because it took her too long to drive to the other club meetings. Though paper folding tends to be a solitary pursuit, she said it's more fun to fold with other origami lovers.

They use an official tongue, the Origami International Language, which is understood by paper folders everywhere. In addition to tossing around terms like "blintz folding," "rabbit earing" and "octagon twists," true devotees tend to share personality traits.

"We like forming patterns, we like solving puzzles and in some ways we're childish -- we like forming paper squirrels and bats and monkeys," explained Dunn, who in addition to working as a professional photographer and hand model, teaches origami in public and private schools around the North Bay.

"Meeting other people who have had this interest as long as I have is just a thrill."

Though Dunn's group and others have sprouted around the



Origami Clubs Bring People From All Walks of Life Into Fold

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region, San Francisco's BARF remains the true jewel in the paper crown that is the Bay Area's origami scene. It was formed in 1992 with the unique, if queasy, moniker.

"We wanted something with a little punch," explained Shafer, who's belonged to the group from the beginning. "It kind of describes the group, in that we're not traditional. We really just fold whatever."

Shafer publishes the monthly BARF newsletter, which he sends to 230 people around the Bay Area -- as well as far-flung locales including Italy, France, Spain, Australia, Japan and Colombia. It includes information about the origami groups, as well as instructions for making Shafer's new designs. He has developed about 600 origami originals to date.

"I like folding things that have never been folded before," he said. "There are infinite ideas out there just waiting to be folded. Anything can fall victim to my folding tendencies."

Among Shafer's recent victims: a walking boat, a clogged artery, an unopenable envelope and a "man swatter" -- it looks like a fly swatter, only with a tiny paper man splattered across it.

He's most proud, though, of folding a 3-foot-square piece of paper into a labyrinth, then realizing it also looked like a man's body.

"This model just came to me," he said, showing it off. "I didn't mean to make a person. I was just trying to make an ancient labyrinth and when I folded it, it miraculously became a person. I was like, 'Whoa! It's my most profound design, anyway.'"

This paper profundity began when he was 10 and Shafer's parents gave him an origami book. He was immediately taken with the art and even used it in his classes at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

"I incorporated origami a lot," he said. "I'd say that origami helped me get through the math major more than math helps my origami."

Now, he spends up to 10 hours a stretch folding paper and has spent 50 hours on some of his more complicated designs. ("I just get in the zone, and I can't stop," he said.) Not surprisingly, he considers origami his favorite activity.

"Well, that and juggling," he said, adding that he's now up to juggling nine balls at a time.

Shafer has achieved the near impossible: making a living as a paper folder. He does street performances in which he rides a unicycle while folding a paper crane that's ablaze. He entertains people with his paper skills at birthday parties, corporate events and other social occasions. His book, "Origami to Astonish and Amuse," will be published soon by St. Martin's Press. People have also paid him to attend origami conferences in Europe, Asia and South America.

But amid his globe-trotting, Shafer loves attending the BARF meetings and folding with like-minded souls. Though their indefatigable leader sits in the upper echelons of the origami world, most BARF members are just regular folks with regular folding skills.

Barbara Contos, 73, of South San Francisco, has belonged to BARF for eight years and says her origami abilities prove "you can still learn at my age."

"It sort of takes you away from your own problems, for one thing," she said. "I often put butterflies in get-well cards and people call me and tell me how much they enjoy it. They're quite fascinated."

Preston Williams, 79, of San Francisco, was busy folding "a whole Valentine's package" -- paper flowers, candy boxes and hearts. He said he likes giving away his little creations. "Sure -- to any lady I meet!" he said, chuckling.

He folds in buses, parks and restaurants. Oftentimes, little kids gather around him to watch.

"It keeps me busy," he said. "It's more or less something to do."

Joe Power, 43, of Mountain View, sat by himself folding red hearts in honor of Valentine's Day. In addition to attending LIPS meetings, he's belonged to BARF for three years and folds paper on the Caltrain on his way up to San Francisco for the meetings.

Where to Go

The Bay Area Rapid Folders meets 2-5 p.m. the first Saturday of every month at the Bernal Heights Branch Library, 500 Cortland St., San Francisco. Free. (510) 548-6658.

The League of Intrepid Paper Sculptors (LIPS) meets 1-3 p.m. on the second Saturday of every month at The Bean Scene, 186 S. Murphy Ave., Sunnyvale. Meetings are free and open to the public. E-mail Laura Mappin at andalar@aimnet.com

The Napa And Sonoma Valley Paperfolders meets 1-4 p.m. the fourth Saturday of every month at the Sonoma Community Art Center, Room 212, 276 East Napa St. in Sonoma. Free, but donations enthusiastically accepted to cover costs! E-mail Kelly Dunn at Kellydunn@aol.com or call her at (707) 255-3886.

The Peninsula Origami People (POP) meets 2-5 p.m. on the fourth Saturday of every month at the Pacifica Branch Library (downstairs room), 104 Hilton Way (off Palmetto Avenue) in Pacifica. Free. E-mail Charles Esseltine at origamiguy1971@yahoo.com or call him at (650) 738-2444.

"People say, 'Could I have that one?' " said the computer programmer for NASA Ames. "It's a great icebreaker."

"If I kept everything I've ever folded, I'd have no room in my apartment. It's fun to make something and give it away and watch somebody's face when they say, 'Oh wow, that's neat!' My co-workers know -- they're festooned."

Power's seventh-grade art teacher told him he had absolutely no artistic ability and he believed her -- until he discovered origami. He saw a television show about paper folding during a high school summer vacation, and he immediately bought origami books and taught himself.

"It's true," he said. "I can't draw a straight line to save my life or sculpt clay, but it turned out I could fold paper. "One of the things I like about origami is, unless you're writing books, there's no possible way to make a living at it. You only do it because you absolutely love it. It's a real feeling of, 'Oh gosh, I was able to fold that!'"

And unlike some other artistic pursuits, origami is cheap. All you need is paper. And patience.

"You just sit there and doodle with paper," Power said. "If it turns out, it turns out, but if it doesn't, you just crumple it up and throw it away. It's not like you've blown a whole month's rent."

Charles Esseltine, 30, of Pacifica, should know. He carries tiny origami figures in an Altoids box. ("It's \$2.50 for the paper, \$1.50 for the Altoids box, plus I can polish off the Altoids," he explained.)

Esseltine found attending BARF and LIPS meetings didn't sufficiently fill his calendar so he formed POP last month. "There weren't enough origami groups," he said. "I had two free weekends and I thought, 'Aha!'"

He's been an origami fan since he was 5 "if you count paper airplanes." His grandmother made paper cranes for him, but suffered a stroke before she could pass on her origami secrets. Esseltine bought origami books in high school and taught himself.

He likes teaching others his science fiction-based origami designs and is currently working on a book called "Space Folds." "The fact that you can take a piece of paper and turn it into something that is totally unique. . ." he said, his voice trailing off. "I guess you could call it an origami-gasm. I'm pretty sure it releases endorphines. And then it's there and it's just -- Wow!"

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