

THE
KNIT
BEFORE CHRISTMAS
Fall 2020



"I'm looking forward to a time when I can once again visit with our knitting groups and volunteers. Until restrictions are lifted and it's okay to meet inside, I've found video conferencing a wonderful tool to stay connected. Whether it's Skype, Zoom, Facetime, or Google Meet, I'm grateful for a way of seeing everyone, even if it is a virtual experience."

– Joanne Bartosik





FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

Years ago, I served on the staff of a large Episcopal church in the city of Chicago. Every August, my boss, the Reverend Ray Webster, would repair to his apartment, turn down the air conditioning, put on a sweater, and play Christmas carols on the stereo as he began to write the script for St. Chrysostom's annual children's Christmas pageant. It was a church with high expectations; Ray was both brilliant and creative, and he knew even though it was late summer, that Christmas was just around the corner.

I think of Ray and his advanced preparations for Christmas when I see the many boxes of knits—hats and scarves—that arrive daily at the International Seafarers' Center in Port Newark. Around

9,000 of these knits will be packed in handmade ditty bags and delivered to seafarers in the Port of New York and New Jersey. A similar number of knits will be sent to SCI's locations in Texas, Louisiana, and Kentucky to be distributed to mariners along the inland river system—stretching from the Gulf of Mexico and Houston Shipping Channel all the way to Minnesota. These handmade knits are delivered in person in December to mariners as a tangible gift that represents our support, admiration, and love for these men and women. As you know firsthand, 18,000 hats and scarves are not created overnight, nor even in the months of November and December. Knitting for Christmas at Sea is a year-round enterprise and summer is a prime time for knitting knowing that, indeed, Christmas is just around the corner.

Earlier this year, the Needlepoint Ministry of St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley—located in Malvern, Pennsylvania—began knitting for the Seamen's Church Institute's Christmas at Sea program, and joining the 162 other knitting groups and 1,000 plus knitters and crocheters who support this important ministry. St. Peter's has a special place in my heart because it is where I worship, where my wife is Rector, and where my 15 year-old daughter is a member of the Needlepoint Ministry. Throughout Covid-19 members of this group met monthly via Zoom to knit and, more recently, have gathered on campus, while maintaining social distancing protocols, to knit in community. With 23 active members and several more occasional knitters, this knitting group provides an intergenerational community of support and friendship for one another (the age of active members ranges from 14 to 85).

Whether you knit alone or as part of a knitting group, you become a part of something larger, and I so appreciate your time and generosity in supporting SCI and this CAS mission. The work of your hands conveys the love and warmth that we extend to the mariners and seafarers who receive your lovely gifts. Thank you for your service!

Faithfully,

The Reverend Mark S. Nestlehutt
President & Executive Director

The largest and most comprehensive mariners' service organization in North America, SCI serves as a voluntary, ecumenical agency affiliated with the Episcopal Church. Founded in 1834, SCI affirms a basic precept of faith communities: welcoming the stranger, regardless of faith or background.



THE KNIT BEFORE CHRISTMAS is published biannually by the Communications Office of The Seamen's Church Institute (SCI).

Bruce G. Paulsen, Esq.
Chairman, Board of Trustees

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seamenschurch.org Christmas at Sea: 973.589.5828
Fall 2020 Volume 14/Number 2

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At age seven or eight, Lily H.'s mother taught her how to crochet the chain stitch. She was looking for a long-term activity to fulfill community service hours for membership in the National Junior Honor Society. Honor N. completed her first scarf last year in eighth grade, and enjoys knitting with a group. She had already started a knitting club at her school. Both teenagers found fun and fellowship when they joined the ladies of the Needlepoint Ministry knitting club.

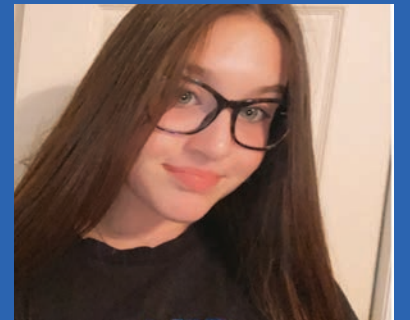
Whether meeting inside the church facility, over Zoom or social distancing outside, the group's story-telling practice seems to be a big draw for both Honor and Lily. "I was nervous at first, but everyone was so nice and welcoming," says Lily. "I like listening to the other knitters' stories, and knowing I can ask questions if I need help with my projects." As a member of Needlepoint Ministry, Lily has been able to build her needlework skills while making a difference in people's lives with her work.



"There are deep conversations, some chit-chatting and a lot in between," says Honor. "It's like being in a room of grandmothers and I love it!"

As creators of knit gifts for the mariners and seafarers of Christmas at Sea, the girls join a tradition with the oldest, and longest continuously running charter knitting program in the U.S. They know that their work will have a major positive impact on these essential workers during the holidays.

Honor offers encouraging advice for any teenagers considering joining a knitting group. "Go for it! Making something from nothing as a gift for someone else is a great feeling. You have nothing to lose and in the end you might make something cool!"



KNIT NOTES

When Covid-19 first struck and governors one-by-one began issuing stay at home orders, I was not prepared. I had at most a week's worth of groceries. My car needed an oil change. I had no idea how I was fixed for paper products and disinfectant. My only hand sanitizer was sitting on my desk in Port Newark, along with my faux leather-bound notebook with all my computer passwords. Things like Zoom and PPE were not in my vocabulary; but, as the weeks turned into months, I, along with my SCI colleagues, figured out new ways to work remotely, without skipping a beat.

I launched #StayHomeandKnit (and crochet), because like many of you, I was feeling isolated and disconnected. The letters, emails, and phone messages I received during this period proved to me just how resilient and creative knitters and crocheters are. For many, crafting turned out to be the perfect antidote for hunkering down at home. As I shared a story about pulling apart some of my daughter's early attempts at knitting to make Seafarer's Scarves, I learned that I was not alone in scrounging around the house hunting for yarn. I anticipate a unique collection of hats, scarves, cowls, et al, in interesting colors. I also believe Christmas at Sea will be more significant and impactful this year than ever before.



As I was focusing on Christmas at Sea, my SCI teammates were coming up with their own innovations. Our chaplains figured out how to reach seafarers and mariners through text messages, video chats, old fashioned telephone calls, and email. Because of different time zones, chaplains responded to seafarer needs round the clock. Our river chaplains rallied local volunteers to bake cookies, donned PPE and personally delivered morale boxes. As our chaplains were providing direct services to seafarers and mariners, our Center for Maritime Education's e-learning staff developed in accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an online user-friendly training module covering best practices dealing with Covid-19 concerns in workspaces. This instructional tool is offered free of charge as a community service. Our administrative team kept everything humming from various locations and we've all managed to stay connected thanks to technology.

Over its long, rich history, SCI has faced numerous challenges, such as 9-11 and Hurricane Sandy. There will certainly be many new and different challenges waiting for us on the other side of the coronavirus curve, but I know we can handle what's ahead. SCI's ability to change with the tide is its strength.

For this issue of *The Knit Before Christmas*, we focused on stories of buoyancy and invention. I hope you will be as inspired as I am to discover the innovative ways in which SCI solves problems while remaining vital and essential to our core mission and vision.

On behalf of the entire SCI team, I'd like to express how deeply grateful we are to all of you for your continued support.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne".

Joanne Bartosik
Manager, Christmas at Sea



A HISTORY OF INNOVATION

BY STEFAN DREISBACH-WILLIAMS
SCI ASSOCIATE ARCHIVIST

SCI was not the first organization pursuing a mission to provide seafarers with both spiritual and social services. It was not even the first organization to establish a floating church, but SCI perfected these and other ideas and made enormous strides in developing services that remain at the core of our work.

Before there were floating churches, there were services held on ships. In the early 19th century, the British and Foreign Seaman's Friend Society and Bethel Union, part of the Port Society of London, began a program of church services aboard ships. These services seemed sufficiently successful that the society sought a ship to serve as a permanent floating chapel. In the summer of 1818, the Seaman's Friend Society took possession of *HMS Speedy* (1803, ex *George Herbert*) renaming it the *Ark*. It served under that name as a floating church for 16 years. Other ships followed, both sequentially and concurrently.

The mission that became SCI didn't even get started till the year that the Seaman's Friend Society scrapped that first floating church in London, and it was another 10 years before SCI had its own church floating in the East River at the end of Pike Street. This was not a ship refitted as a church but a purpose-built structure on a hull. A second church followed on the Hudson at Dey Street, and the first church required a replacement when it was stove in by heavy snow. The floating churches are a great example of a trend in SCI's history. We often perfect rather than pilot new ideas. In all our achievements, two very different initiatives stand out as original innovations: knitting gifts for sailors and telemedicine.

SCI's Christmas at Sea program of knitting hats and scarves for seafarers has been broadly adopted by other missions to seafarers, and appears to be a unique innovation. Our literature indicates that we launched this program in 1898 during the Spanish American War. I've seen no evidence of similar programs that predate that claim. Hobbyist knitting itself dates to the 1840s, almost as soon as it stopped being a household chore. Knitting industrialized early. Like weaving, it remained a cottage industry for many years before finally scaling up to factory production in the early 19th century at which time the necessary drudgery of knitting clothes transformed into an accessible craft, set apart from affordable mass produced wares by the personal connection to the individual who made the item. Given knitwear's long association with maritime work, knit Christmas gifts proved an ideal way to break through shipboard isolation and help constituents feel connected to those the mission served.

SCI's telemedicine program does not appear to have inspired the wide adoption of our knitting programs, which is partly a mark of the extraordinary foresight and ambition in the project. It's a kind of service more often conducted by governments than charities, and a cutting edge field that continues to develop and advance.

Many surveys of telemedicine's history define the practice broadly, including general long-distance communication. Other discussions of telemedicine focus on the transmission of visual information, including X-rays, video, and charts as a defining characteristic. I believe that the most useful definition of telemedicine is the assessment of a patient's health by a physician using long distance communication technology. Alexander Graham Bell did not practice



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At a minimum, the Seamen's Church Institute has proven agile, an early adopter, if not an innovator, constantly adjusting to seafarers' changing needs. In some cases, SCI innovation has brought together disparate ideas in powerful ways for the first time.

telemedicine when he said "Watson, I need you" in the first telephone transmission; he just called for in-person assistance in treating his self-diagnosed acid burn as one might call for an ambulance today or for a medical response to a patient in a room on a ward.

In contrast, SCI's KDKF Medico Radio service appears (in the absence of an extensive historical survey) to be a unique innovation. The notion that civilians should receive formal basic medical training, or first aid, had been around for about 50 years and SCI had aggressively sought to teach first aid to sailors since 1910 and ensure that all officers had enough training to provide on-the-spot care and assist a ship's doctor. The institute had struggled (and ultimately succeeded) to ensure that all ships had a fully stocked medical chest aboard, as required, to say nothing of a doctor. In 1921 more than 75% of ships at sea had no doctor aboard, but more than 80% had radios.

Radio was a very new technology but exploding in application. The Wireless Ship Act of 1910 required all ships carrying more than 50 passengers more than 200 miles off the coast to carry radio equipment with a range of 100 miles. The radio act of 1912 required all seafaring vessels to maintain 24-hour radio

watch. Under these circumstances, SCI's radio medical services seem both innovative and inevitable.

The first radio station license in America was issued on October 27, 1920. One week later, SCI received license no. 176 permitting it to operate KDKF from 9am-5pm, which is when SCI's doctor was on duty in the clinic. In short order, the nearby Hudson Street Hospital offered to have a doctor available to SCI by phone at any hour and SCI's license was expanded to 24-hour broadcasting in April 1921 with service beginning in May.

If a ship couldn't reach KDKF directly it could reach out to a ship located closer to New York and additional ships as necessary till a chain of radio operators (relying primarily on radioed telegraph signals) had connected the ship in need of medical attention to either a doctor on board another ship or the doctor on call through KDKF. But the light of the KDKF radio tower was just the cherry atop the 13-story innovation that was 25 South Street.

By the 1950s, the institute was prepared to address every need that sailors might have throughout their careers. 25 South Street was not only a secure, clean room at a fair price, it offered banking, luggage storage, entertainment, low cost dining and soft drinks, reading material for one's time in NYC and to take aboard ship, a place to write to one's family and a US Post Office to send and receive mail, medical care, professional development education, social services including alcohol recovery support and clubs for socializing with others of one's language or a date. The Bureau of Missing Seamen provided reassurance to those seeking and to those sought who didn't want to be found.

Just when SCI had it pretty well figured out, the industry embarked on a series of changes that rivaled the advent of steam power in reshaping the work of global shipping. Systemization and the rise of the automobile drove these changes. In 1955 SCI hosted a celebration for the opening of the southern section of the FDR Drive, a highway that sped traffic over the docks along the East River waterfront. The Holland Tunnel and George Washington Bridge had made it possible to get trucks from Manhattan to New Jersey and the rest of America bypassing the congestion at the docks in Manhattan and Brooklyn. In April 1956 Malcom McLean's trucking company loaded 58 containers onto the Ideal-X in Newark. Over the next 30 years the waterfront that had served New York for 350 years was abandoned for containerized shipping facilities in New Jersey. It took SCI only a few years after the Ideal-X left the wharf to catch the trend and build a center in Newark.

As seafarers spent less and less time ashore, the nature of SCI's 360° services changed. Subsequent SCI buildings at 15 State Street and 241 Water Street had fewer hotel facilities and then none. Today, SCI has returned to the practices of the British and Foreign Seaman's Friend Society and Bethel Union, caring for seafarers' spiritual and personal well-being aboard the ships—along with transportation to the mall.



In all our achievements, two very different initiatives stand out as original innovations: knitting gifts for sailors and telemedicine.



INNOVATION IN THE NEW NORMAL

BY SCI CHAPLAIN CORA DIDOMENICO

The early crisis days are over and the awareness that we are in a long-term emergency has begun to settle into our bones and brains. From a macro perspective, Seamen's Church Institute has been extremely innovative and quick to respond to the pandemic and the evolved needs of seafarers to those calling our ports and around the world. From a micro perspective, the challenges COVID-19 brings to the hands and laborers of global shipping has created a rising strain of economic hardship and personal desperation.

Over the past six months, we've struggled to share good news from Port Newark. Our ship visits are often heart-breaking and painful. I often leave ship visits with tears welling up in my eyes, followed by restorative prayer and reflection, only to visit another ship under the same circumstances. COVID rules put us six feet apart and in masks and outside in a port where no one can hear each other through the masks or the sounds of moving containers. Working cross culturally and across languages require us to rely heavily on facial cues, cues that are now covered in the interest of safety. As chaplains, the best we can do is sit with, be present, and be a witness to their isolation and pain.

To address seafarers' economic needs as a result of the pandemic, we very early on created a Seafarer SOS Fund. The need for this fund arose as we were applying for outside grants for seafarers facing economic hardship due to the inability to rejoin ships. At the beginning of the pandemic, seafarers were not deemed "essential workers" and therefore could not travel in and out of the United States overriding any sort of national legislature involving foreign travel. As international airports around the globe closed their runways, there became no options for seafarers to sign on or sign off. We worked closely with the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) in obtaining grants for seafarers

suffering at home without contracts and obtained much success in the application process. As the crisis continued, it became clear there was a larger need for funds than ever expected.

In our own search for economic support to fund our mission in Port Newark, an unbudgeted COVID-19 emergency relief grant from The TK Foundation freed up internal resources. With support from the SCI board and our Executive Director Mark Nestlehutt, this grant enabled us to allocate the seed money for our SOS Fund.

The Fund was actively used within a week of creation. An oiler on a small container ship was faced with a medical emergency due to his extended contract. He originally planned for an eight-month contract, with an agreement to extend or shorten by one month. The oiler contacted me at the tenth month of his contract stating that he had run out of vital prescription drugs and at this point the only way off the ship would be in a medical emergency—one that would be costly to himself and the company. He had brought enough medicine for a two-month extension, should there be any sort of delay in his contract. We took advantage of the United States evolving health care system and set up a virtual call with a physician. After an extensive exam and various medical questions, we were able to secure an American prescription and I was headed to the pharmacy. The pharmacist was brilliant and reduced the cost from hundreds of dollars without insurance, to under one hundred dollars. The SOS Fund covered the cost of the oiler's medication. Words cannot express the relief and gratitude conveyed by this seafarer faced with a potentially life-threatening situation.

We hope to continue to build the fund in order to care for the growing needs of this invisible and yet essential global workforce.



CASA VISIT

As many members of the Christmas at Sea community are aware, CAS Manager Joanne Bartosik is regularly invited to call on knitting groups both in-person and online. Perhaps some of you have even hosted a knitting group meeting where Joanne was a guest or featured speaker.

“Visiting with our Christmas at Sea knitting groups is one of the highlights of my job,” says Joanne. “It’s such an honor to see the faces, and hear directly from the volunteers, who create all of the beautiful gifts for our mariners and seafarers .”

Did you know that Joanne also presents programs to student groups? Last May, Joanne gave a lunch-and-learn talk to two chapters of the Culturally Aware Student Association (CASA) at the Grace Church School located in downtown Manhattan. CASA, one of 30 clubs offered at the co-educational PreK-to-Gr12 independent school, has a Middle School branch for 5-6th graders, and one for Junior High students in 7th and 8th grade. Once a week over lunch, the CASA students tackle serious subjects like bullying and homelessness in the safe space of their club. Then, they develop action projects addressing issues based on those discussions. In the past they have collected blankets for those in need in the winter, and assembled forums focused on anti-racism and equity.

“The clubs are composed of children from diverse backgrounds,” says Linda Cooper, faculty advisor for

CASA. “There is a lot of peer teaching happening. Everyone learns from each other.”

Although Joanne had scheduled an in-person visit with the clubs for May, her plans were circumvented by COVID restrictions. Instead, over Zoom, she spoke about SCI’s mission and the unique lives of mariners, to students who were eating tuna fish sandwiches and pizza in their living rooms, around the kitchen table and at desks in their bedrooms, in front of their computers.

Joanne followed her presentation with an engaging question and answer session. “I had robust conversations with the students from both age groups. The students were very bright and knowledgeable. If possible, we’d love to arrange field trips for Grace Church School to Port Newark and our International Seafarers’ Center next year.”

“I was pleasantly surprised by the reception to Joanne’s talk,” says Linda who is the Assistant to the Head of School and Advisor to Families and Students of Diverse Cultural Backgrounds. “I had expected much of the information to go over the students’ heads, especially for Middle Schoolers. But believe me, they took in every word! I could tell by the questions they asked both during the sessions, and later, with me. They understood and were very interested!”

Those conversations continued as members of the two clubs met over the summer. Linda hopes to include projects for Christmas at Sea in the activities for the students in the upcoming year.



ANNE LEERMAKERS

Adventures in Knitting



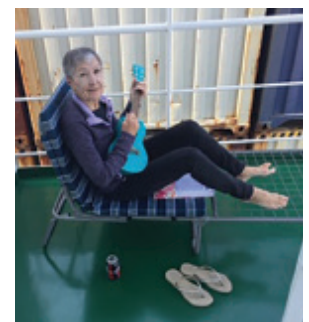
After traversing the globe on adventures that included 35 celebrity cruises, Christmas at Sea Angel Anne Leermakers and her husband decided to tour on a container vessel. They traveled from Charleston, SC through the Panama Canal to Sidney, Australia as two of only four guests on the massive ship.

"Although he is an attorney, my husband loves anything to do with the Navy or the water. We've always owned boats, so I am accustomed to the joys and restrictions of travel on the water," says Anne. "However, on this trip, there was no phone, no TV, no internet. We would not see another vessel for days out on the open sea! Spotting an occasional flying fish or the turtles in the canal was a highlight!"

Immersing themselves in the culture of the ship, the couple stayed in a private cabin that featured bunk beds, a tiny fridge and a built-in desk, situated between two officer rooms. They shared space with the working seafarers while exercising and sight-seeing on deck during the day, listened to the seafarers' karaoke in the evening, and ate meals with the officers in the galley. Several times the engine died, and they idled out in the ocean until repairs were made. Anne and her husband were even required to participate in the monthly lifeboat safety drill with the crew. They suited up in jumpsuits equipped with all of the gear, climbed into the lifeboat, and then successfully removed their jumpsuits and located their food supply under their seats as instructed.

"We were all packed into that one lifeboat like sardines. You can't be a princess and go on one of these trips," says Anne. "The only concession that the ship's officers made for us in the drill was bypassing the lifeboat's drop into the water – a drop of several stories high! I felt very thankful to have avoided that experience."

When faced with the challenges of her container ship expedition, Anne turned to knitting, completing an ambitious butterfly shawl (*pictured below*) during the long journey. She developed a deep admiration and respect for the seafarers, and their resilience in coping with the unique circumstances of their work environment. Her observations on the ship validated her years of volunteer needlework on behalf of Christmas at Sea.



Knitting has often played a role in events in Anne's life. One of her first projects as a young teen was argyle socks for her father when "they were a real fad" in the late 1950s. He continued to wear those socks on special occasions throughout his life, even into old age.

Years later, upon purchase of a condo with her husband near Vail, CO, Anne was surprised to encounter her best friend from college and high school who had also just bought a condo next door. They had not seen each other for more than five years. In celebration, Anne knit her friend socks to wear cross-country skiing. Her friend told Anne that she did not realize how special those socks were until she pulled off her boots after a day of skiing with a group. All of her skiing companions raved about her socks. "Those are hand-knit socks! You must be really special to have someone make hand-knit ski socks like that for you!"

Anne's younger sister, who shares her love of knitting, endured great emotional trials. She suffered from bipolar disorder. Her husband joined the Unification movement, leaving her to raise three children under the age of 11. Despite Anne's best efforts to help her – even purchasing a car for her at one point – Anne and her sister became estranged. Periodically over the next 14 years, Anne emailed her sister without response.

"I thought I just can't go to heaven without trying again. So, I sent her a birthday card with my best wishes."

Shortly after placing the card in the mail, Anne received a phone call from her sister. They agreed to meet for coffee and lunch at a rest stop McDonald's equidistant between their two homes. Her sister arrived with all of her knitting needles and stacks of yarn in tow. She had developed arthritis, and wondered if Anne could complete and mail her unfinished needlework projects for her.

"Of everything in my life, reuniting with my sister is the greatest gift that knitting has given me."



Christmas at Sea
The Seamen's Church Institute
118 Export Street
Port Newark, NJ 07114



YOU ARE IMPORTANT TO US!

Please contact me if you or your crafting group have a change of address, a new email address or any questions about in-kind or financial gifts. If you are in the neighborhood of SCI's International Seafarers' Center in Port Newark, I would love to meet you! I am also happy to give a presentation, in person or even via Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, any video conferencing platform, for those of you outside of the greater NYC area. I look forward to hearing from you!

– Joanne (cas@seamenschurch.org 973.589.5828)