

Sleeping mat project helps homeless, reuses plastic

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Caleb Swanson

Volunteers take time weekly to come together and work as one well-oiled machine. They work on every step in the extensive mat-making process, all the while talking and laughing about their past week.

Pollution and homelessness, two significant issues facing the country and our county, have sparked creative and innovative solutions. One group in Carlton seeks to address both issues with its 100-percent-recycled plastic sleeping mats.

Every Tuesday, a group of half a dozen people gather at 9 a.m. to cut, tie, and crochet plastic bags into durable sleeping mats for the homeless population living throughout Carlton County.

Maureen Singleton, the group's founder, was a member of a similar group in Florida which has been making mats for nearly four years. She has made 39 mats over the years and brought the group to Carlton just last year. Singleton, along with the other members of the group, wants to aid the homeless people who migrate to the Carlton County area during the summers.

Each mat lies roughly six feet long by three feet wide and prevents between 700 to 800 bags from being added to the growing amount of plastic waste. The mat is primarily used as a barrier between the owner and the ground, but its water-resistant nature also makes it a useful protector against wet sleeping surfaces and rain. Furthermore, the mats are easy to transport since they are lightweight and have carrying straps.

The mats are similar to snowflakes in the sense that the group tends to diversify the design using different-colored bags. The snowflake tactic is used to keep one's mat easily recognizable in large groups.

The mat-making process is broken down into four key steps.

The first step is collecting bags, with help from members of churches, local businesses and anyone else who is willing to give them their plastic bags.

The next step is to fold the bags and cut off the tops and bottoms of the bags. What remains of the bag is cut into the loops used to make the plastic "yarn," or "plarn."



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Plastic yarn, or "plarn," is made from donated plastic bags. It acts as the same as yarn in a crocheted quilt. Bags are collected by volunteers and are always needed. It takes 700-800 plastic bags to make one mat.

After the loops are made, they are tied into long lengths of plarn, which are rolled together into a giant plastic yarn ball.

The final step is crocheting the plarn into mats.

The process can take weeks to complete and requires a lot of time and care. Once the mats are completed, the group gives them to the Cloquet Salvation Army or to the Churches United in Ministry (CHUM) in Duluth to be distributed to the homeless population.

The group urges anyone who wants to help to get involved, whether by collecting bags or making plarn. They expressed the need for more crocheters and people willing to learn how to crochet. They are also open to teaching organizations such as Boy Scout troops and 4-H groups how to make plarn and crochet the mats.

So, if you have a pile of plastic bags sitting around after a shopping trip or have a Tuesday morning free, the mat makers at Bethesda Evangelical Lutheran Church in Carlton invite you to stop by.