

Permission to Play

No skill or experience required to join the Gorge Art Group

By Drew Myron

Surrounded by a mess of paints, papers and washes of color, Fern Johnson is certain of one thing: She is no artist.

"My art development was really stunted," she says, laughing. "But I wanted to learn, and that's why I started this group."

She is referring to the Gorge Art Group, a weekly gathering of people who come together to fulfill their creative cravings. No artistic skill or experience is required, just a desire to create and play.

The Gorge Art Group meets Mondays from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Lyle Activity Center. The cost is \$1 per session to cover room rental. Participants bring—and often pool—their supplies.

Members may drop in or attend on a regular basis, and can bring their own art projects or join in the project introduced that week.

"Non-artists are especially encouraged to come play," says Fern.

Fern founded the Homesteading Fair and previously worked as a middle and high school teacher. But this weekly gathering is not a class, and she is not teaching.

"We don't have teachers or leaders, we just encourage each other and experiment," says Fern, who serves as group facilitator. "I'm always looking for projects I can be successful at right away."

Weekly projects range from arts to crafts, from easy to involved. Recent projects have included making sketch books, creating abstract painted papers later used in collages, hand-painting tiles, and making painted signs using scrap wood and favorite words or sayings.



A desire to develop her creativity prompted Fern Johnson to start the Gorge Art Group. The group meets weekly at the Lyle Activity Center.

Fern frequently turns to YouTube videos to provide some how-to help, and plans to invite guest artists to lead unusual projects, such as needle felting or glass art.

Participants are welcome to bring their well-behaved children.

"There were a number of people who wanted to come but couldn't manage child care," says Fern. "Now their kids can come create art, too."

Initiated last summer, the Gorge Art Group is part of a nationwide trend of creative self-exploration. From adult coloring books to cell phone photography, self-directed artistic

pursuits are ample. Art groups have proliferated as a way to come together in fun and meaningful ways.

"We are in the midst of a seismic shift in cultural production, moving from a 'sit-back-and-be-told culture' to a 'making-and-doing culture,'" notes a study from the James Irvine Foundation, an art-funding organization. "The sustained economic downturn that began in 2008, rising ticket prices, the pervasiveness of social media, the proliferation of digital content and rising expectations for self-guided, on-demand, customized experiences have all contributed to a cultural environment

primed for active arts practice.”

From knitting circles to writing groups, people are seeking creative—and communal—outlets.

In addition to the Gorge Art Group, a group of beginning to advanced artists dubbed “The Doodlers” meets every week across the Columbia River in The Dalles to create together. There is no instructor and no cost. Participants are encouraged to learn from each other.

“Life gets busy,” says Fern. “It’s what happens to all of us. Some people have always been artists, and they get away from it when life gets busy. But some are like me, who have never been artistic. Having this time, this group, gives a nudge to remind us what we enjoy. It also sets aside a time just for art and the things that are important and fun.”

For many, the chance to create and connect in a group setting is key.

“The group is a nice thing to get us out,” says Cheri DeHart, who lives in High Prairie on a farm with 50 peacocks, 80 goats, eight llamas, and countless chickens. She and her husband operate the gas station in Lyle.

“I like this group because it’s nice to see people other than my husband or the animals,” Cheri says.

“The spirit of the group is ‘Just try things,’ ” says Fern. “I’ve noticed I get a little stuck because I don’t trust myself to not mess it up. But here, there’s a real sense of encouragement and the collaboration of ideas is great.”

In fact, this enthusiasm has prompted the creation of the Gorge Art Co-op, comprised of Gorge Art Group members interested in selling their arts and crafts cooperatively at area events and markets.

For Kim Hoff, a mother and artist who lives in Lyle, the group is a gathering of like-minded people.

“And I get to play,” she says. “I’m very traditional in the way I do art, so this is a good way to do new things in a new way. It encourages me to experiment and try new things.”

Fern agrees.



Cheri DeHart lives in High Prairie and enjoys getting together each week with her new art friends.



Kim Hoff paints, draws, sculpts and more. The group, she says, encourages her to try new things.

“Someone in the group will throw out an idea, or suggest, ‘Maybe go this way,’ ” she says. “It’s always good to have suggestions.”

In some ways, she says, art is a learned skill.

“Am I going to be amazing at it?” she asks. “Probably not. But I can be

competent and put myself out there and try it, and enjoy it.” ■

The Gorge Art Group meets at the Lyle Activity Center at the corner of Highway 14 and Third Street in Lyle. For more information, go to www.facebook.com/groups/GorgeArtGroup, or email Fern Johnson at fernjohnson@gmail.com. The Doodlers in The Dalles meets at a new location each week. Email thedallesart@gmail.com.