

A Lifelong Quilter Died Before Completing Gorgeous U.S. Map Project. Now, Hundreds Of Chicago Crafters Are Finishing Job To Honor Her

Courtesy of Kelly Bauer, Block Club of Chicago

More than 1,000 people have volunteered to help embroiderer Shannon Downey finish the quilt in honor of Rita Smith.

A Rogers Park woman has brought together dozens of volunteers to finish a large, extremely detailed quilt left behind by a woman who died earlier this year.

Shannon Downey, who has been stitching since she was a kid and is known for mixing embroidery with activism, stumbled upon the unfinished quilt in September but has gained more attention for it this week after writing about it on Twitter.

Thousands of people have shared Downey's story of coming across the quilt, learning about the woman who was making it and enlisting volunteers to finish it and honor the memory of its maker.

Downey frequently goes to estate sales to find vintage and antique textiles, and in early September she went to a home in suburban Mount Prospect for a sale. She walked in and quickly came across an embroidered map of the United States framed and hung on the wall.

The map was in "perfect shape" and just \$5, so Downey bought it. That's when the cashier mentioned, "Oh, there's a box of fabric in that bedroom if you're looking for stitching stuff."

Downey went to the room to investigate and found a Tupperware container full of plans and materials for a quilt the homeowner had never been able to complete.

"I have an annoying habit of having to purchase and finish unfinished projects if I think that the person has passed on ... but usually I'm just buying a half-done pillow that needs half an hour's worth of stitching and then it's done," Downey said. "But this one was massive and it just felt really significant for some reason. And so I bought it."

'I had to buy it and finish it'
Why 1,000 people offered to crowd-stitch the quilt of a dead woman none of them knew

By Allison Klein
in association with

Shannon Downey likes craft projects and she also frequents estate sales near her home in Chicago. When she's at a sale and sees small, unfinished craft projects in a home, often embroidery, she will buy it just to finish it and then donate it somewhere.

"There's no way that said I'm treating with an unfinished project left behind," Downey, 41, wrote on Twitter.

She said it's a personal code she lives by, and hopes that when she dies, someone will collect any of her unfinished craft projects and complete them.

So when Downey was at an estate sale last month in the home of a woman who died at age 99, and came across a large plastic bin with an enormous, unfinished embroidery and quilting project that was of a United States map, she sat on the floor and almost cried.

"I knew I had to buy it and finish it," she said, adding that it would be a huge undertaking and she doesn't know how to quilt.

The project, which was already begun and had been carefully laid out in the fabric bin, entails embroidering a piece of fabric for each of the 50 states, and 50 separate stars, then nursing them into a quilt. The original crafter who started the project was Rita Smith, who died in August at age 99, Downey said.

Once Downey learned Smith's age, and saw how many other crafting projects she'd completed - "she was a ferocious crafter," Downey said - she doubled down on completing the massive quilt. Downey is both an avid crafter and also is active in the crafting community.

Downey took to Instagram, asking her fellow crafters for help embroidering the states.

"A short story and request for stitching help," she began in her post. "You know my love of estate sales and the fact that I cannot handle mending upon unfinished projects. I just know that the person who passed can't possibly rest easy with an unfinished project out there. I buy them and finish them as tribute."

She explained what she found at the estate sale in the Mount Prospect home of the late Rita Smith, who was "clearly an astounding stitcher with a love for the U.S. and state flowers."

"Rita had prepped, cut, all the squares and started transferring the designs onto the squares. She started stitching New Jersey. Obviously I bought the whole box. I cannot possibly stitch all this myself with all the rest of my stuff but I'm wondering if we can crowd stitch/crowd finish this project for Rita?"

It was a public call for people to volunteer to stitch a square. The plan would be that Downey would mail a square to a volunteer, who would then stitch that state and mail it back. Then once she gets them all back, she'd host a quilting party to put them all together.

"Anyone interested in helping me help Rita rest in craft peace?!", she asked.

The response was overwhelming, she said, with more than 1,000 stitchers offering to help on Instagram.

She picked 100 people - 50 for the states and 50 to each stitch a star - and then she made a spreadsheet to keep track of it all. She went to the post office and mailed out 100 envelopes, asking volunteers to send back the completed embroidery by Nov. 15.

She mailed the envelopes to volunteers across the country. Michelle Anais Beaulieu-Morgan, 41, who works at Yale University, received an envelope at her Connecticut home after seeing Downey's post on Instagram and volunteering to be part of it.

"Crafting for me is part of my recovery story - I'm about 4.5 years sober," Beaulieu-Morgan said in an email to The Washington Post. "The slow work of embroidering is really meditative. Also, I think historically embroidery has been under-theorized and certainly not appreciated nearly enough."

She is about halfway through embroidering her home state, Maine, and said she expects, in total, it to take her about 20 hours to finish.

Cheer Knox Kirk, 42, who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and is embroidering Alabama, said she also volunteered through the Instagram post. She estimates it will take her between five and 10 hours to finish her state.

"I love anything that brings people together for a bigger cause," Kirk, a systems analyst, wrote in an email to The Post.

Downey posted her story on Twitter on Wednesday, and it quickly went viral. She said she was really happy with all the support for Smith, whom she learned had a husband who died in 2009, and also a son who is still alive.

One unexpected upside of this experience has been support on social media from her fellow crafters who share her anxiety about filling in a project.

Downey, the director of development at a nonprofit, said she hopes to have the quilt completed by December or January, and she'd like to find a home in a quilt museum for it.

"I want it to be somewhere it will be appreciated and a testament to what Rita created," Downey said. "And also what community can do. This is such a beautiful story of the power of social media for good."

Shannon Downey with the embroidery and quilt materials she purchased at an estate sale.



The quilt was supposed to fit a queen-sized bed and would feature a map of the United States surrounded by hexagons representing the individual states. Each hexagon would have an outline of the state, the state flower and bird and stitched writing noting when the state entered the union.

The quilt was also supposed to feature 50 stars, one for each state, and be bordered in a red, white and blue quote.

Once Downey started going through the plans, she realized the quilt would be an enormous undertaking — one that would take her years to finish alone, especially since she doesn't know how to quilt.

So Downey shared her story of the quilt on Instagram, thinking a few people would be interested and would help her. Maybe she'd get enough people to each do a state and star or two, she hoped.

Instead, more than 1,000 people volunteered to help within 24 hours of the Instagram post going up.

"Which was amazing and wildly overwhelming," Downey said.

Another 30 quilters in Chicago also reached out saying they'd help put together the pieces once the embroidery was done.

With so many people trying to help, Downey built spreadsheets and got contact and mailing information for the volunteers to keep everything organized. She also decided she wouldn't embroider any of the state hexagons so more volunteers would be able to join in.

Downey's sizable audience on social media didn't just stop at volunteering, though. They also started to look for more information about Rita Smith, the woman who had planned to make the quilt before her death.

What they found brought even more meaning to the project: Smith was a Mount Prospect woman who had once been a nurse and recently died at 99 years old.

Downey was able to connect with Smith's son, William Smith, who said he was surprised at the attention — but confirmed his mother had been a "monster crafter." She'd frequently reupholstered furniture and was constantly sewing and stitching.

"It was just really cool to learn a little bit more about her as a person and to be able to share that with the group" of volunteers, Downey said. "We've become very close to her through our studying of her embroidery and the research we've done, so it was neat to get some additional context and know that she was a lovely human who was deeply loved."



Downey shipped out the plans to her volunteers, and in doing so she realized Rita Smith had actually finished hexagons for two of the states. She wept at seeing her fellow embroiderer's work.

Those states will be incorporated into the quilt, and the volunteers are studying Smith's stitching style so they can mimic it in tribute to her.

"She's a really talented stitcher," Downey said. "Everyone feels incredible pressure to up their game."

One characteristic of Smith's work: She "clearly loved" French knots, which are hit-or-miss among other stitchers because they're quite challenging, Downey said. But every volunteer is going to try to incorporate at least one French knot in each hexagon or star, and some people are even filling in their stars entirely with French knots in honor of Smith.



"It's really neat and special to see the different ways people are incorporating that into their pieces," Downey said.

Everyone is supposed to send back their finished stitchwork by Nov. 15. Then, Downey will move on to quilting. She thinks the project will require four or five "sewing bees" where everyone will work together over several hours.

Downey first thought she'd also have to embroider the map of the United States that goes at the center of the quilt — but she's realized she can instead use the framed map she bought at Smith's home. That will be another way she can incorporate Smith's work into the project and honor her, she said.



"... Now Rita's hand will be in the center," Downey said. "Her presence is going to be seen throughout [the quilt], which is really, really neat." Those interested in following Downey's and the volunteers' work can search the hashtag #RitasQuilt on Instagram.

And while normally Downey gives away the work she finishes from estate sales, she has special plans for Smith's quilt.

"We've sort of collectively agreed that we'd love for it to go to a quilting museum for their collection so Rita's work ... and the work of all these people can sort of be a testament to community and [how] social media can actually be used for good and how we can come together around something and work together to create something really special out of it," Downey said.

But William Smith suspects his mother hadn't been able to work on the quilt in 15 or 20 years, as she'd dedicated the last years of her life to caring for her husband.