

Local weaver keeping 300-year tradition alive

Written by Stephanie Turner, Aiken Standard
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It smells as sweet as vanilla. It grows in moist areas along shores and woods but has been used by many. It looks delicate but can form baskets, hats and jewelry.

Its name is sweetgrass, and, for centuries, people have interacted with it as a craft.

Sarah Hott is one of those people. She is a sweetgrass weaver. Jewelry, hats, purses, magazine racks, bread and fruit trays and, even, toilet paper holders all fill her stands.

Some items are Hott's own handiwork, while others are from her family. This means some of the pieces date back more than 40 years, she said. Hott is a fifth generation basket-weaver. "When I was younger, I didn't like basket-weaving. I felt like it was a hard chore," she said. Hott's mom, Pearl Mangiult, would sit Hott's sisters and her down and force them to make starter bottoms and hot plates. "To make a hot plate was a hard job," Hott said.

When she left the Palmetto State, she lost touch with the weaving. Instead, she worked and traveled. When Hott returned in 2006, her sister Marilyn Dingle got her back on her crafting game.

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“She’s like a mother to me,” Hott said. “She’s hardcore, but she’s good.”

Before Dingle’s guidance, Hott would wind her stitches. According to Dingle, this lessens the basket’s quality. “She would smack me on the hand if I wound a stitch,” Hott said, laughing at the thought. Hott still looks to her sisters for advice. Yet she is far from being a beginner.

“Anybody interested, I will teach (them),” she said. Her teaching involves her upcoming generation – her grandson, 8-year-old Jasper. “Jasper loves doing this, at times,” she said.

In May, Hott visited his school. She handed out necklaces and taught his class how to make their own. Jasper has also taught one of his peers, a young girl during a visit to a local arts center. Hott hopes she can also teach her granddaughter, Olivia, too. Olivia is 14 months old.

A project can take her hours or months, Hott said.

“When I’m basket-weaving, I don’t know what I’m going to create until it’s finished sometimes. It’s like it kind of speaks to me,” Hott said.

She takes a spoon handle and nail and pushes in course bulrush, fine pine needles and non-fanned out palmetto leaves to mix with the thin sweetgrass. Other crafters have been known to use needles and cow ribs.

The activity relieves Hott’s stress. But it’s also something more. “It’s the oldest black craft in South Carolina,” she said. “I feel like everybody should have a piece of this craft in this home, and I’m going to help them try to get it.” The weaving dates back more than 300 years.

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It started in the lands of Sierra Leone, West Africa, according to her husband Larry. When the people came over here to be traded off as slaves, they brought the craft with them. They worked the plantations of Mount Pleasant. Both areas grew sweetgrass. The slaves, using their culture to their advantage, pulled out the sweetgrass and formed winnowing baskets, as known as “fanners.” Those baskets were to help process the rice grown in the plantations. This was just one example of the slaves’ craftiness.

Sweetgrass weaving still remains a part of the Mount Pleasant area. The city now has a Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Preservation Society and hosts an annual Sweetgrass Festival. Hott’s niece, Lynette Youson, has served on the board for the festival, according to its website.

Dingle also lives in the Charleston area. However, she will be down to partner with her sister for this year’s Aiken’s Makin festival.

Larry and Sarah are currently retired. But they keep busy. This summer, they participated with Salley’s food program at the city’s civic center. Hott would take her customers’ orders with her to dabble with during her breaks.

One day, they had taken Olivia out there with them. The food program was winding down, and the Hotts were done with their shifts. Sarah had laid out many of her pieces to show that day.

“Larry can tell you the history, but I can’t get him to sew baskets,” she said, turning to him. Both were wearing T-shirts from a past Sweetgrass Festival. “I don’t have the dexterity or the patience,” he said, leaning back in his chair. Sarah then sat and picked up the hot plate she was finishing for a client. Olivia had now crawled up and fallen asleep in Larry’s lap. Sarah glanced over.

“Olivia just reminded me of this. My mom use to take the youngest girl on her lap and sewed away while she slept.” Sarah then just kept sewing. “It’s almost done,” she said about the hot plate.

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Then, she will move on the next project.

Hott can be found at the Aiken's Farmers Market on weekends. She can also be contacted at 803-258-9077 or 803-646-0493.

For more information on sweetgrass, visit www.plants.usda.gov.