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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

New life into a worn book

By Matt Combs Register-Herald Reporter Jan 22, 2018



Amy Jackson demonstrates a coptic stitch binding.

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In an age of digitization and modernization, Amy Jackson is an outlier. In a state known for its outmigration, Jackson is an anomaly.

"Bookbinding is sort of this genre that encompasses a wide variety of things," Jackson explained. "It can be either making a book from parts and combining all those things: sewing together the pages, creating the cover, putting everything together and ending up with a book. It can also mean repairing a damaged book. It can also mean repairing any of the components that make up a book so that it's suitable for further use or it can be preserved in a museum setting."

Jackson's passion for the craft is straightforward, but her path to the craft, away from the craft and now to West Virginia is as crooked as a mountain road.

As a member of the National Arts Honor Society in high school in her native Winchester, Va., Jackson fell in love with printmaking.

That love led her to Longwood University, where she enrolled in book arts classes because they were tied together with printmaking studies.

Book arts added something extra to the precise world of printmaking that the young woman fell in love with.

"There's also, in bookbinding, maybe a little bit more than printmaking, just sort of a feel to it," Jackson said. "Where you get to a point where you learn enough about the materials that you can feel what's right."

That craft led to a combination of skills that Jackson was looking for.

"You're skating this fine line between science and engineering and art, which is really appealing to me," Jackson said.

When she was describing her classes with her father, fate stepped in.

Her father, an electrician in Winchester, told Jackson that he had recently wired a book bindery in her hometown and encouraged her to try to get a position there.

Jackson did just that, and for about five years would learn the bookbinding trade at Cat Tail Run Bookbinding, working her way up to learn the ropes and the workings of equipment necessary in the rare trade.

At Cat Tail Run, Jackson would work on antique family Bibles and books for small museums without their own bookbinding staff.

"You work on someone's rare or valuable book and that's one feeling," Jackson said. "Then you work on somebody's Bible that they've written all their notes in for the past 50 years and that's a different kind of precious relic."

Her position at the bindery led her to a contract position at the National Gallery of Art two days a week, where she learned the world of large-scale nationally funded conservancy work.

Jackson herself was working toward entering graduate school for conservation when life stepped in and changed her course.

Her then boyfriend, now husband, was offered a chance to help start up a background check business in Chattanooga and asked Jackson to come along.

Worn out by work and school, Jackson jumped at the chance and embarked on what she calls her quarter-life crisis.

Then in 2016, the couple was granted another opportunity.

They would be able to set up a West Virginia branch of the company and could choose anywhere in the Mountain State to do so.

Jackson's husband is a climber and the couple had visited Fayetteville many times to climb and visit friends.

"We knew the most people here. We knew the area and that we really liked it," Jackson said.

That choice has been fortuitous.

The branch has expanded to seven employees through the state and Jackson has begun teaching entry-level bookbinding courses for the Fayetteville Arts Coalition.

"Coming here to Fayetteville, I've really gone back to my schooling on the matter and what I did in college," Jackson said.

And while Jackson said bookbinding is its own little subculture, she said being in a town full of those involved in the subcultures of climbing and rafting has made the transition a little easier.

Being from Virginia, Jackson said she has been looked at curiously for settling in West Virginia, but said that curiosity quickly fades away.

"I think the most important thing to do as someone coming into a place like Fayetteville, as a young person, is just to open-heartedly appreciate it," Jackson said.

The young woman shared a local experience of how that open-heartedness paid off.

After seeing a photo of the Prince Train Station, Jackson and her husband went to check the historic building out.

Fascinated by the architecture of the building, Jackson noticed a linoleum floor that had an interesting drawing on it.

Jackson was surprised when a man she took as the caretaker of the facility asked if she wanted to see inside.

Jumping at the opportunity, Jackson and her husband spent awhile snapping photos and soaking in the decades-old feel of the place.

After thanking the caretaker, the couple drove away before Jackson's husband asked her if she had seen the man's tattoo.

She hadn't, but her husband explained that it was a tattoo of the drawing on the linoleum.

"That guy loves this place and was just so excited that I loved it too," Jackson said.

The love of place and history in West Virginia is one of the characteristics that the young woman finds so attractive about the Mountain State.

"Fayetteville, Fayette County and this area in West Virginia have this really amazing quality in their history," Jackson said. "You can still experience things because they have not been overly messed with."

Jackson said that the feeling experienced in local history can also be felt when repairing a book and added that her ability to work with her hands on a physical object offers her relatability to a working-class area that many of her own generation does not have.

"A lot of people now are just sort of typing or talking or writing and their job is not about anything physically in front of them," Jackson said. "That is a weird disconnect."

And though her passion is art, Jackson is proud that bookbinding and the book arts are practical arts.

"People who work hard want their objects to work hard too," she said. "They can relate to them in that way."

Though agreeing that bookbinding and the printed word may have lost its importance to the general public because of technological advancements, Jackson believes that books and the craft of making books are as important as ever, if not more so.

"You progress a certain amount with technology and then there's usually a renewed interest in older ways," she said. "I think that it's really important not to lose the traditional old handmade ways of doing things."

Although she may not be involved in bookbinding every day and is uncertain if she will ever return to it full time, Jackson is grateful for the opportunity to help teach others the craft so that they may pick up the art.

"I don't want someone to think about it," Jackson said. "I just want them to be able to look at it and figure it out. You have to do that if you're a bookbinder. You have to look at an object and think critically about what it needs."

Jackson's next bookbinding workshop for the Fayetteville Arts Coalition is Friday, Jan. 26, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. and Saturday, Jan. 27, from 9 a.m. to noon. The cost of the workshop is \$55. More information is available at the Fayetteville Arts Coalition Facebook page or at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/bookbinding-workshop-tickets-39398012516>.

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