

Needles & Knits set to close after more than 30 years helping keep Aurora cozy



Needles & Knits, Aurora's only wool shop, is set to close this fall after more than 30 years of helping knitters in the community keep their loved ones warm and cozy.

Founded 31 years ago by Tove Gilje, a resident of Aurora for 41 years, the store is winding down operations this fall as the 81-year-old business owner eyes retirement.

A native of Norway, Gilje grew up in a time where knitting was not only a popular pastime, but a necessity and even something that was taught in schools. Times may have changed, but the passion for the craft has not.

"I come from Norway and when we grew up, it was considered one of the poorest countries in Europe; it's not anymore because they found oil in the North Sea and that changed the whole economic picture, but when I grew up, we were a poor country and Norway had been occupied for five years and had absolutely no resources," Gilje shares. "So, we learned to knit. We had to keep the sheep farmers alive! That's how we learned in school and knitting and crocheting was part of the curriculum."

After she and her husband, Terke, came to Canada, they settled in this community where they ran an ocean transportation business, a venture that might seem unlikely for a rather landlocked town like Aurora.

"He made it work," says Tove, but, as she approached her 50th birthday, she was looking for new challenges and a change of pace.

"My husband and I worked together, but you can only do that for so many years and either you get a divorce or you get into something else," she says with a laugh.

Knitters and crocheters may be forgiven for letting out a sigh of relief she chose that second path; while there were three wool shops in Aurora when she first moved here in 1984, the last one closed the same year she opened Needles & Knits on Yonge Street, just north of Kennedy, in a former house that had seen many years as an antiques shop.

"Probably very poorly," she says with a chuckle when asked about how she went about building the business from the ground up. "I had no background in retail, so it slowly grew. This is a peak-and-valley type of business, but knitting and crocheting will never go away. It's been a joy to build this up and be able to help and assist people who do this type of craft."

Looking back at what set Needles & Knits apart in the knitting and crocheting community, Gilje takes great pride in her knowledge of fibres, different kinds of yarns, offering a variety, and being able to provide advice on which materials work best for specific projects.

She finds customers often come in with, at the very least, a 'basic knowledge of knitting,' but 'what I often find is that when you use a pattern, most of them have been translated from a different language and that translation can be somewhat confusing. That's where I come in because I speak German and all the Scandinavian languages except Finnish.'

'If you run into a problem, either you give it up or you get help and I would like people not to give up, but to help them over that hurdle,' says Gilje, noting that with her closure, a 'friendly competitor' in Newmarket might be the last one in York Region still standing. 'I'm very proud of what I have done. I feel I accomplished something and now Karen in Newmarket will continue. I usually say we're friendly competitors; we cooperate and I will continue to give her a hand when she needs it.'

As for what's next?

'I probably should catch up with all the things I should have done over the years at home,' she smiles. 'I have no regrets. It's been fantastic - a really fantastic 30 years.'

By Brock Weir
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