



# Growing Diversity, Growing Guilds

I was pleased to see that attendance remained robust for the MAFA 2023 conference. We've also added guilds over the last few years. Individual guilds are growing as well, yet our membership continues to skew older, overwhelmingly female and not ethnically diverse when compared with knitting and quilting groups. There are many reasons/excuses for this but there are also places to look to find expansion and change. In this article I'll be sharing what MAFA has learned, what members guilds are doing, and how to think about the future.

I could have called this article The Future of Fiber, because our country is changing, becoming more diverse and more accepting of diversity, and our guilds must change too in order to sustain our organizations and our crafts. This is especially true for our core fiber arts: weaving and spinning. There are many barriers to participation in these activities and guilds exist to help new weavers and spinners overcome them. How do we acquaint the public with our crafts and then nurture growth in those who are interested?

The pandemic loomed large over my tenure as president. It forced MAFA to look at new ways to meet and to do our work. We learned that virtual meeting tools could be force multipliers. We had nearly twice as many attendees at MAFA Virtual 2021 as we had at our in person conference two years earlier. We began offering access to our Zoom account to our member guilds. We sponsored roundtable discussions and free lectures to our members and the wider fiber world. Guilds that used online tools to stay connected throughout the lockdown, and after, have maintained and even grown their membership. We all learned that we could find new fiber enthusiasts and nurture our crafts and our relationships by leaping into the new world of hybrid meetings.

Now that we are back out in the world, we shouldn't take growth or diversity for granted. I'd like to share with you some of the work member guilds have done to make our fiber world visible and accessible to the wider community.

## Potomac Fiber Arts Guild

Stacy Cantrell shared her guild's activities. I would like to highlight that the guild thinks about diversity when inviting speakers, promoting members' work, choosing study group topics and outreach activities. Online meetings are recorded and the recordings are posted so those unable to attend can still be part of the action. They try to be responsive to members' needs, as indicated below:

*When we have had issues in the past of potential members challenging us on inclusion, we take it very seriously and discuss all options that we can offer this person. We discuss these challenges and decide actions at our board meetings. We do all that we can to make everyone feel welcome. We have welcomed requests to change the meeting day for religious reasons, we have on occasion paid for sign language interpreters. Every request that comes in, we try to accommodate within reason.*

The full article is here: <https://mafafiber.org/wp-content/uploads/Diversity/PFAG-Diversity.pdf>.

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### Philadelphia Guild of Handweavers

Sara Robbins shared that her guild focused on being inclusive of all types of fiber-related crafts. Numerous outreach activities during the year attract new members because their Outreach team is racially and demographically diverse, letting people see that all are welcome. They have embraced topics of current interest, especially to younger people, such as sustainability. Their Board of Directors is “made up of both older and younger people, people of color and people who identify themselves with they/them pronouns. They partner with community groups and local businesses.

The full article is here: <https://mafafiber.org/wp-content/uploads/Diversity/PGHW-Diversity.pdf>.

### Fiber Guild of the Blue Ridge

Sharon Resnick shared the following information with us:

*I have been working on a community outreach project for our Guild, in partnership with another local non-profit. The goals of this are to further our mission of fiber arts education by making weaving a more visible process, teaching people what it is and giving them the opportunity to try and learn, hands-on. Details are here, and I'm happy to answer any questions about this effort. <https://www.fiberguildbr.org/mobile-hope/>. The guild also does various outreach programs with local schools, usually demonstrations requested by teachers for specific school events. Our goals with this are usually simply educating - we typically don't try to recruit the students to join our Guild.*

Sharon reported that though students were engaged, it has not led to new members. She speculated that the age difference was a barrier.

### Wild Hand

Wild Hand is a shop in Philadelphia that emphasizes hiring and featuring diverse teachers and artists. In addition to an atmosphere that is welcoming to all, the shop has a fiber lending box, similar to a library box, where people can donate yarn or get free yarn to use in projects. You can learn about this shop's approach by listening to this podcast:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/liz-sytsma-theresa-hill-wild-hand/id1508572777?i=1000589679082>

As you can see, there is great variety and ingenuity in the efforts of members of MAFA to grow inclusive fiber communities. I hope that you also see that opening our arms to those around us helps to grow our guilds and our fiber crafts. Sometimes we have to step out of our comfort zone, embracing technology or new fiber arts, but the results are worth the effort.

I am grateful to the MAFA guild members who shared ideas with me. I remain committed to continuing this work and I invite like-minded individuals to connect and share.

Wishing everyone the best future possible,  
Helena Valentine, MAFA Past President  
[pastpresident@mafafiber.org](mailto:pastpresident@mafafiber.org)