



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Mia de Bethune and Drew Matott of Peace Paper Project.

## Reconstituting fibers, more than matter is transformed

By Carter Smith

DOBBS FERRY — “It all begins with the rag,” reads the Web site for Peace Paper Project, an innovative book and papermaking program led by artists Drew Matott and Margaret Mahan. “Whether it’s an old pair of jeans or the family tablecloth, every rag has a story to tell.”

From Monday, July 16, through Wednesday, July 18, Mahan and Matott offered students at The Children’s Village in Dobbs Ferry a unique opportunity for some very hands-on storytelling by bringing a three-day papermaking and bookbinding workshop to the campus. After pulping personal clothing from shirts and sheets, stu-

dents made journals and sketchbooks to record artistic responses. The students, who range in age from 14 to 17, also worked to create their own designs for pulp printing and stencil art.

Peace Paper Project is based on the idea that the traditional Western process of making paper by hand offers a unique way to commemorate personal experience. Using fabric that is associated with that experience, say Matott and Mahan, can be a way to bring closure to traumatic episodes or celebrate joyful ones. Whether the workshops take place outdoors in a public place, in a classroom or studio, or in another private place, Peace Paper uses its portable studio to bring papermaking workshops into com-

munities throughout the world.

For example, prior to their visit to CV, Mahan, Matott, and workshop facilitator Arielle Matthews conducted a seven-day workshop at the Torpedo Factory Art Center, in Alexandria, Va. “We were working with art therapists, artists, cancer survivors, and military veterans,” explained Matott. “They all brought in clothing that had some personal significance. For some it was clothing that they wore while they were undergoing chemotherapy. Veterans brought clothing they wore while stationed in Iraq or Afghanistan... Everybody took their clothing and pulped it to make paper.”

Wherever the workshops take place, the process starts with whatever fibers

participants bring to the table. During a demonstration on the first day of their CV visit, Matott picked up an old white shirt and began to cut and then tear it to pieces. “The first thing you do is you cut off all the buttons — all the hard pieces that can’t go through our machine,” explained Mahan. Cutting up the fabric can take as long as an hour, so the process often begins with participants sharing the stories behind their fabric as they work.

Matott and Mahan travel with a pulping machine called a portable Hollander beater, which processes one pound of dry rags at a time and can be powered by an electric motor or bicy-

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cle. Hollander beaters were first developed by the Dutch in 1680. "Modern Hollander beaters are made of cast iron, bronze or steel, so they're very heavy and stationary," said Matott. "So I commissioned a guy in 2008 to make one that could fit into a rolling suitcase. That's allowed us to change the model of having people come to the paper studio, and instead we can bring paper to the people."

The technology itself is straightforward. Water carries the cloth fibers around a basin and through a bladed roll, which separates the weave of the rag until it is fully saturated with the water. At this point, the pulp is ready to be formed into sheets, so it is transferred into buckets and vats.

To form the pieces of paper, participants then use a screen that is fastened to a wooden frame, as well as a separate fitted frame called a deckle, that captures the intended shape of the piece of paper. The mold and deckle are submerged into a vat of the moist pulp and pulled up through the fibrous water. As the water drains away, a thick wet sheet of paper is left behind on the frame. That individual sheet is then transferred to a growing stack of sheets, and the process begins again. Eventually, the stack of paper is pressed to squeeze out the excess water, which strengthens the finished paper.

In fact, during the first session at CV, Matott pressed the pile of paper that the group had just made by driving over it in a car belonging to Hastings resident Mia de Bethune, the arts enrichment coordinator at the residential treatment facility.

Matott, Mahan, and Peace Paper Project came to CV thanks to de Bethune, an artist herself as well as a licensed creative arts therapist who has supervised over 20 art therapy interns from New York University, The College of New Rochelle, The School of Visual Arts, and other area schools.

De Bethune, who first contacted Matott and Mahan about a year ago, learned about Peace Paper Project through fellow art therapist Gretchen Miller, a member of the project's team. Miller, who teaches and lectures nationally, frequently cites the benefits of papermaking workshops for the art therapy community. She also serves as secretary of the nonprofit group Art Therapy Without Borders.

Peace Paper Project is a partner of that organization. "Mia thought it would be a good exercise to allow the kids to direct their energy toward something positive," said Matott.

Matott did not start out studying paper or bookmaking, but film. "A required course I took as an undergrad at SUNY Buffalo in 1999 was in papermaking. I loved the processes, I really enjoyed the act of taking an article of clothing and cutting it up, beating it, and then making the papers."

Asked whether the actual physical process of papermaking is part of what makes it therapeutic, Matott elaborated. "Not only is it the coming together to share stories behind the fabric, but it's also seeing the machine grind it up — everybody feeds their stuff into the machine and they see it transform," he explained. "It's like rinsing the fibers, recreating, putting the fibers back together and creating a new meaning out of the fiber," he said. "That's really what drew me to paper, that rinsing effect, that energy of being down at the studio making 400 sheets of paper over a few days is very meditative, and you can really go into a zone. That's one of the main therapeutic elements... there's a calming, a mellowness to it."

Though Peace Paper Project is only about a year old, Matott has been involved in papermaking and printmaking for a number of years. After receiving



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## Margaret Mahan of Peace Paper Project.

his BFA in printmaking from Buffalo, he earned an MFA in book and paper arts from Columbia College-Chicago. In addition to Peace Paper, he cofounded the Green Door Studio, People's Republic of Paper, the Combat Paper Project, BluSeed Paper Mill, and Free Your Mind Press. Since 2009, he has taught and exhibited internationally and completed numerous artist residencies.

The goal of Peace Project is to work internationally with marginalized populations, such as refugees, orphans, and other people who have survived trauma. In their work in the U.S., Peace Project is especially interested in working with art therapists, and training art therapists to work with communities. "Those workshops are generally a combination of art therapists and survivors of traumas, so that hopefully therapists can see this as something they

can continue to do," said Matott.

Not all of Peace Paper's work is specifically therapeutic. Recently, the Southbank Centre, an arts center in London, commissioned the group to create paper for Poetry Parnasus, billed as the largest poetry festival ever staged in the United Kingdom. The event, which took place June 26-July 1, featured poets, rappers, spoken word artists, singers, and storytellers from each of the nations represented in the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. "They would come in and write down one of their poems in their own language on a piece of paper," explained Mahan. "This year, Drew and I made the paper for this event."

Mahan, who has a B.A. in English literature from Saint Michael's College in Burlington, Vt., first became involved in papermaking through Matott's Green Door Studio, an artists' collective in Ver-

mont. "I started making paper there with some of my friends and some veterans in the area who were making paper out of their uniforms. I was studying English at the time, and so I really enjoyed taking my clothes, creating paper with them, and then writing my poetry on the paper. I felt like it enriched my poetry." In the fall of 2009, she traveled to Dharamsala, India, where did research on Tibetan poetry in exile while working with the group Tibet Writes.

"When I graduated I joined Drew to travel around with the Combat Paper Project, helping veterans cut up their uniforms and create art on those," she said. "Once we saw there was something powerful, some sort of catharsis happening with that, Drew and I split off and created Peace Paper Project as a way of bringing papermaking to other marginal populations."

After the first day of working with CV's youth, Mahan recalled that while the students initially seemed unsure of what to make of the workshop, they almost immediately settled in after being shown how to form their first sheets of paper. One student, Elijah, his hand submerged in a vat of cool fibrous water holding the remnants of an article of his clothing, "just looked so relaxed," said Mahan. "At one point he said, 'This feels so good — to be swimming in my shirt. I feel so happy.'"

## 'Spotlight' ideas sought

The Rivertowns Enterprise welcomes story ideas for our "Spotlight on the Arts" feature, which focuses on various artists, including musicians, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, writers, and dancers, as well as events happening in area galleries, schools, and libraries. To submit an idea, please e-mail [rivertownsnews@optonline.net](mailto:rivertownsnews@optonline.net) with "Spotlight on the Arts" in the subject field or drop off information at the paper's office, 95 Main St., Dobbs Ferry.