

AURORA



Sharing a colorful yarn: Melissa Shippey '99

By Felicia Burud

Above: Melissa Shippey displays some of her custom-dyed yarn and knitting in August 2022 at the Georgeson Botanical Garden on the UAF Troth Yeddha' campus. UAF photo by Eric Engman.

Melissa Shippey '99 walked into a knitting store in Whitehorse 20 years ago and came out with a lasting pastime that recently led her into a new business — hand-dyeing yarn.

Her knitting friends rave about her yarn hues, or colorways, which even include a blue-and-gold fiber dubbed Nanook Nation.



Top left: A batch of yarn from the Nanook Nation colorway soaks in a pan during the dyeing process. Top right: Some Nanook Nation yarn is wrapped into a finished skein. Photos courtesy of Melissa Shippey. Bottom: Shippey shows off a finished piece of the Nanook Nation colorway yarn. UAF photo by Eric Engman.

Shippey said her grandmother tried to teach her to knit when she was young, but it didn't take.

Then, two decades ago, some UAF friends invited her to Whitehorse in Canada's Yukon to run the Klondike Road Relay.

As they drove, Shippey was fascinated to find that all the women on the trip had their knitting.

So she visited the store in Whitehorse. She bought enough yarn to make a pair of socks and an Icelandic sweater for her husband.

She still has the socks — she doesn't use them much because she doesn't want to wear out her first project.

A friend, **Dorte Dissing '97, '03**, helped her get started.

"Melissa is a super cool person who is good at deciding to do something and then does it," Dissing said.

The introduction to knitting on the relay trip led her to join her friends' knitting group, which meets every week and has for the past 20 years. In January of each year, they enjoy a retreat together away from Fairbanks and their families to eat, ski and knit.

Shippey, the environmental compliance coordinator for Doyon Utilities in Fairbanks, began working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her knitting group didn't meet.

One day, while watching YouTube videos of a yarn dyer, she had an epiphany — she could do that. It was a business she could start out of her home with little initial investment to see if she liked it.

That was the beginning of 64 Degrees North Fibers. She began with small batches and gave it away to her knitting friends. They thought it was awesome.

64 Degrees North Fibers yarn is available in several colorways named using various themes, including some Alaska-inspired colors such as Cranberry, Cloudberry and Sockeye. She has colorways that reflect college school colors, including the Nanook Nation. The yarn can be purchased at her online store and local yarns stores, including Yarn Over in Fairbanks.



Cloudberrries, ripening at left, inspired the yarn colorway shown at right. Photos courtesy of Melissa Shippey.

Shippey dyes yarn from sources in the U.S., U.K., South America, as well as from Coyote Trail Farm and Fiber Mill in Fairbanks. She dyes in small batches in her kitchen and is working on building a larger dyeing studio in her garage in the near future.

She uses various methods, including acid chemical dyes and also plant-based processes. One of her plant dyes uses large yellow marigolds that produce a soft yellow colorway that she's named Limoncello.



Shippey sprinkles dye onto yarn in a heated pan at her home in August 2022. UAF photo by Eric Engman.

Jen Danielson '95, another knitting friend, said many members of their group have messed around with dyeing. But Shippey has nailed the technique, she said.

“Melissa is a scientist so she’s more methodical and is able to do it in a reproducible way,” Danielson said.

Shippey's scientific path began in 1995 when she entered UAF as an undergraduate wildlife biology major. She had already worked in several historical national parks before making her way to Alaska to work in Denali National Park as a park ranger.

After looking at career prospects, she shifted her major to natural resources management, where she could study soil science, and graduated in 1999.

"It was fun, and plants are kinda my favorite area of interest," she said.

Since her graduation, Shippey has worked in environmental science. At Doyon Utilities, a Doyon Ltd. subsidiary that operates utilities on a few Alaska military bases, she functions as the storm water manager and is certified in erosion and sediment control.



Shippey conducts stream hydrology work at the Lik Deposit near the Red Dog Mine in northwestern Alaska in the early 2010s. Photo courtesy of Melissa Shippey.

“I really enjoy the inspection field work and training our utility operators on the Army and State of Alaska stormwater management requirements,” she said.

Shippey’s love of plant science is now inspiring another project — building really big perennial beds and growing her own dye garden in her yard.



Yarns in a variety of colorways
from 64 Degrees North Fibers lie
on display at the Georgeson
Botanical Garden. UAF photo by
Eric Engman.



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