Alyssa Sacora

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Alyssa Sacora asked as she welcomed me into Catalyst Fiber Workshop in Fairview. "We like for people to feel at home here." Once the studio of Fairview's beloved artist Connie Bostic who passed away in 2024, this space now holds looms, spinning wheels, a drum carder for processing wool, plus sewing machines, sergers and any other tools you might need for a handcrafted textile project. Catalyst is the brainchild of Alyssa and her friend, artist and weaving instructor, Melanie Wilder. I sat down with Alyssa to learn more about her and this unique enterprise.

Alyssa and her husband, Adam, moved to Fairview in 2009. "We had been renting in Black Mountain while we looked for a place to buy. We found a house in the Garren Creek area, and it checked all our boxes."

To be clear, there were a lot of boxes.

First, the house had to be priced for two young adults at the beginning of their careers; and that may have been the easiest box to check. They also needed acreage so they could plant a garden and build a roomy coop for free-range chickens. In addition, Alyssa and Adam are intentional about their personal impact on the environment and wanted a property they could easily power with solar energy. They also needed space inside and out for Alyssa's many craft interests.

Alyssa is a modern version of a 19th century Jill-of-all-trades. She is an artist who makes paper (yes, paper), grows and cans food, makes baskets (wait until you hear about this) and designs fabric that she weaves herself from natural fibers.

"I've got to use my hands," she said, smiling. But Alyssa is not only a crafter. She's a unique blend of community organizer and entrepreneur. "I guess you could say that I'm interested in the relationship between people and plants," she said. "And I'm curious about small businesses, food, farming and craft." The marriage of these interests gave birth to Alyssa's passion for shared community spaces where creative energy flows.

"I worked in a community commercial kitchen for a while. There were so many different businesses sharing that space," Alyssa said. It was in that setting that her appreciation for value-added farm products grew. "You can sell a crate of salsa at a higher rate than a box of tomatoes; jams bring in more than raw fruit; there's salad dressing, kombucha, sauerkraut. . . and those are just food products. You can also make tinctures and lotions and other products from medicinal plants."

I had never considered this aspect of farming. It took me a minute to catch up.

"Hey, do you mind if I tie some threads while we talk?" Alyssa asked. She selected a plastic box, pulled out a cloth, and threaded her needle.

"I taught myself to sew," she said, keeping her eyes on the fabric in her hands. "But my grandmother—she's 97 now—taught me how to quilt." A diligent student, Alyssa became immersed in the age-old craft and began making gifts for loved ones. She described one of her creations. "My sister loves the Grateful Dead, so I made her a wall-hanging with Jerry Garcia's face appliqued from tie-dyed fabric. It looked just like him." She said this as if she was describing a color-by-number kit she picked up as an afterthought, not an intricate design she conceived and created from scratch.

In addition to Catalyst, Alyssa also runs a home-based business called The Patchwork Underground that sells her art and teaches workshops. "My paper-making classes run from June through October." Alyssa said. "I hold them outside, weather permitting, in my backyard, on the deck, and in the yard under this amazing shade tree." She has led craft seminars at other locations too: Asheville Art Museum, the Arboretum, the John C. Campbell Folk School, and more. She also sells art through galleries and pop-ups.

Plus, she's always learning new skills. "About 10 years ago, I read an article in the Town Crier about a basket maker," she said. Alyssa sought out the artist, was hired to work as an intern, and learned the craft for herself. What kind of baskets, you ask? Kudzu. Yep, kudzu! That pesky invasive species that blankets our mountain vegetation and holds it captive for half the year. It turns out that, in the right hands, this bully of a vine can be transformed into exquisite baskets. "Coiled Basketry" (reminiscent of the famous Charleston, SC baskets) is one of the courses Alyssa offers in her backyard studio and at Catalyst Fiber Workshop. Kudzu included.

As for weaving fibers into cloth, she came to this craft more recently. "I took a weaving class in 2023 and loved it!" Alyssa, enthusiastic for all things handmade, became even more spirited when the conversation shifted to fabric. "I started on a borrowed loom and wanted to keep going."

But have you priced looms? They are not cheap. Plus, they take up a lot of room.

Luckily, Alyssa's friend Melanie had been toying with the idea of a community weaving studio for about a decade. When Alyssa and Melanie put their heads together, they came up with a plan to make it work. About that time, the building they now occupy became available for lease. "It was perfect," Alyssa told me. "Once we realized we could get this space, we knew it was the right time." They signed the lease in August of this year.

"Most people don't need to buy their own looms," she said. "But, if you were looking to buy one, this would be a great place for you to come and try different types. We have six here, and community members have access to all of them when they are not in use." You can also work on your own projects and know you have experts like Alyssa and Melanie on hand if you need help. "Here you can lay out fabric, weave, sew, spin or process a fleece into yarn. Whatever your fiber project is," Alyssa gestured around the studio, "we got you!"

Want to see for yourself? Catalyst is holding an open house on December 14 from 10 am to 3 pm. You should go. They'll make you feel right at home.

For more info, you can visit catalystfiberworkshop.com.

Rev. Dr. Aileen Mitchell Lawrimore is the pastor of Ecclesia Baptist, which meets at 607 Fairview Road. She blogs at aileenmitchelllawrimore.com.

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