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# Cathy thrives on the challenge of making memories to cherish

Bearcrafty bears may not yet be instantly recognisable as their creator is still keen to try new things but with her determination, you can be sure, one day, they will be

BY JILL MUNDY

It took a complete change of circumstances for Cathy Kammers to become a Bear Artist. Born in The Netherlands, she lived there until just five years ago when she moved to the UK. She now lives in Grimsby, N.E. Lincolnshire and has been making bears for the past four of those five years.

'When I was a kid, I made all kinds of toys just for fun. I was always sewing and making things. Now it has become my work as well as my hobby.'

Cathy makes memory bears, to commemorate a person for a loved one or family member. It was another chance event that began this bear making career. 'I had come across the idea of memory bears before and when the ex-wife of my husband passed away, we had her coat. I thought it might be nice to make a bear from it for her daughter and so asked my husband what he thought of the idea. He thought it would be great so I went ahead and made the bear. I was pleased with it but I had lots of ideas on how I could have made it better. I began making bears from baby clothes for other family members as well as bears for myself and that was it - I was addicted!'

Trading under the name Bearcrafty, Cathy has been selling her bears for only a year and is thrilled with how it is going. She pretty much works full time at making the memory bears and also more traditional furry ones.

'Each spare moment I have I'm in my sewing room.' It started as a simple hobby and really is supposed to still be a hobby alongside caring for her husband - to give Cathy some precious chill out time and to keep her mind off sad things. 'But it was a new challenge for me - and what a great feeling if people outside of my family and friends seem to like what I make. I took orders for my memory bears and made them in-between making the fur bears. Now it seems I don't have much time at all but it's such a great feeling.'

Although the memory bears are made from various fabrics, Cathy describes them as traditional in style. 'I call them 'bears with a past'; they are made from special clothing, clothes with a memory such as baby's first clothes, that favourite sweater from Grandad, my beautiful wedding gown, school uniforms, etc. At the moment I mostly seem to make this type of bear but I also make faux fur bears, some old-fashioned in style, others modern and in vibrant colours. Then there are my fantasy bears, where I add things like horns, mini bears from long pile fur that challenge me every time and mohair bears which I dress in my own handmade clothing.'

Cathy lets her imagination run riot and has endless ideas for new designs. 'If I see a nice piece of fur, I just see what comes out of it. Sometimes I start with a bear but then end up with something else because I think it de-







serves to be something more special. I like them all - it's just that moment and that piece of fur that I'm working with."

Viewing every new design as a challenge, Cathy likes to try different things such as making paw pads in different ways or using different eyes. "I paint, I play with clay, appliqué pads, embroidered pads, etc. I really don't know how best to describe my bears to be honest!"

Lucky enough to have a house with spare bedrooms, Cathy began creating her bears in a small room but the bears and materials soon took over so she moved into the larger bedroom. "It's situated at the back of the house with full sun (if we are lucky) and I have rebuilt it into a fully functional studio, where I can accommodate everything in the one room."

The bears are all cotter pin jointed, with glass eyes and added details. It wasn't a case of getting it right first time - practice makes perfect and Cathy admits to making 20-25 bears before she was completely satis-

fied with the pattern. "My bears are not made as a toy, I stuff them firmly and tighten up the limbs so they are easier to pose and can sit rather than be hanging in a corner. The memory bears are unique because they are made to remember a person or a special event, to be cherished and perhaps offering comfort. I believe my fur bears are special because I always add something to them that I have made myself - a handprinted eye, a clay nose, full clothing or a handmade necklace... each of these make them more personal."

Cathy is still experimenting with her patterns, some have open mouths, some closed. "Maybe I should just make one design and stick to it so that it would be instantly recognisable as a fur Bearcrafty bear... but I love the challenge with each bear, letting my creativity free my mind with them and hope that people like them as they are. The memory bears are a different story. I still aim to make them how I think they will look best but sometimes

I work with the wishes of the customer as to which fabric to use, etc."

Often Cathy has to force herself to stop working on a particular bear because it is 'officially' finished. "Some people just order a bear and ask for it to have eyelashes or glasses; some choose to have a cap, waistcoat or a dress while others allow me to have free reign to see what I think would be nicest."

Out of choice, Cathy would choose to work with good quality wool fabrics or knitwear for her memory bears, which she feels... allows them to be shaped better and adds more volume than a cotton shirt. "For my fur bears I mostly use long pile faux fur. I hope to add alpaca and mohair more often - I would like to keep mohair for dressed bears and alpaca... I'm not sure yet."

When it comes to inspiration, the memory bears are also quite unique. Cathy is often presented with a bag of clothing. "As soon as I open that bag with clothes in, my mind starts working on how to make nice combinations.





Sometimes the ideas come straight away or sometimes I need to look at it for a few days and then suddenly that lightbulb flashes in my head and I know what I am going to do."

Cathy is now fairly confident as to what will work. "The first bear I made was cute (well it was a bear and bears are cute) and there will always be someone who will like it but I didn't see it as a WOW bear. I used safety joints and eyes without knowing the ins and outs of bear making. Each bear I made after that, I changed a little bit of the pattern to see the different results - the size of the leg or the pad, the arms or the face. I'm very happy with my pattern now. Sometimes someone will ask me if I can make something different, like a rounder body for example, and yes, of course I can but I prefer not to as it might bring the bear out of proportion. The bears definitely improve over time as you get more confident and master new techniques - I definitely still keep challenging myself with my fur bears to make them better."

Having been selling her bears for a year on Facebook, Cathy decided to branch out in public. "So I did my first bear fair in Sheffield in November 2017 and for a first show, I thought it was a success. I also have a website where I post my new bears. If they haven't sold within a few weeks I then put them on Facebook and other online sites. The memory bears can be ordered via Facebook, the website and Ebay and are made to order."

With so many different designs and types of bear, does Cathy have a favourite? "I probably have a few! Peanut, the first fur bear I made, will never leave home but I have a few favourite memory bears too; they stand out because of the fabric choice or the design. And I'm in love with my first mohair bear, Peggie, with her dress and bloomers. I see so much in her to inspire future bears. Also my faux fur bears... and my fantasy features... and my droopy-eyed bears... Also, if a bear fails in my eyes, like when I try something new with a pattern but I'm not

happy with it, it ends up in my shelf!"

Some of the bears left on the shelf, literally include a bear with the markings of Cathy's own Border collie. "With white in his head. He was ok until I tried to needle felt a nose - yuk!" He is kept company by the first open mouthed bear Cathy made and a memory bear made from Cathy's first wedding gown. "It's better to try something out with your own clothing than that belonging to someone else and it's better to make a bear from the gown than to leave it in a box in the loft!"

It's clear that Cathy is thriving on the challenges she gives herself and although it can be difficult at times, with the two distinct types of bear pulling her in different directions, she wouldn't have it any other way.



#### THE BEAR FACTS

Bearcrafty  
by Catharina Kammern  
web: [www.bearcrafty.co.uk](http://www.bearcrafty.co.uk)  
facebook: [www.facebook.com/Bearcrafty/](http://www.facebook.com/Bearcrafty/)

