

Escapes

A spine-tingling school in Virginia

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Karma works in funny ways. Last week in Winchester, I discovered that it wasn't the jocks or the skateboarders or the punk rockers who grew up to have the coolest workspaces. Hands down, it was the bookworms.

At Cat Tail Run School for Bookbinding Arts, I found a workshop filled with tools and supplies as varied as syringes and shoe wax. It's a space where sculpting, surgery, chemistry and fingerpainting come together to create magic, and a place where spitball-making is encouraged. Okay, so it's the kind of glue-filled spitball that you use to repair books, not lob across the cafeteria. But still. Chalk one up for the bibliophiles.

Several hours a week, I manage the rare-book inventory of a used-book store on Capitol Hill, and the owner suggested that I take a class in basic book repair. Every so often, he has one of our old books restored, and I'm always shocked at how long it takes and how much it costs. Other than that, I didn't know the first thing about book restoration.

On a Thursday morning, I arrived at Cat Tail Run, on a country road just outside Winchester. I'd imagined working in a sterile, library-like place. What I found was a large, colorful space with several rooms dedicated to the TLC of old books. About a dozen workstations were spread atop plywood floors, and every square inch was covered with things like old clocks and rotary phones and tubes of paint. One drawer was labeled "Weird Stuff."

The bindery owner, Jill, set out banana bread and coffee, instructing the students to find a workspace. The class was a mix: Besides me, there was a retired federal bankruptcy judge, a school librarian, a pipe organist, a retired military aircraft mechanic, a woman who collects Passover Haggadot, a guy who works in IT and a young man who already makes his own books.

I settled in by a window and took inventory of my tools: a plastic cup of paste, a bowl of glue, paintbrushes, a small electric fan, wax paper, washcloths and duct-tape-covered bricks. There was a little set of plastic drawers that contained cotton balls, Q-Tips, tweezers, scissors, needles, sandpaper, rubber gloves, a scalpel, a micro-spatula and a tongue depressor-size tool that I would later learn is a bone folder, used to make creases.

We'd been instructed to bring some old volumes to repair — books that still had covers but needed work on the corners, spines or edges.

"There are plenty of bad things that happen to good books," Jill said. "People pull them off the shelves by the endcap, drop them on the floor, let the dog chew them and try to repair them at home." (I glanced guiltily at a childhood book in my stack, tooth-marked and Scotch-taped.) She ran through the agenda, which included tightening loose hinges and repairing corners and spine edges.

When she isn't teaching, Jill runs one of the busiest binderies in the region, repairing books from museums, universities and individuals — especially family Bibles. She has been refining her craft for decades, since she transformed her father's clock repair shop into her first bindery. She now has a staff of five and walks around in an oversize torn T-shirt that she uses to wipe glue off her fingers. She tends to talk without punctuation and often uses "honking" to emphasize a point, as in, "honking rare" or "big honking piece."



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

By the book: Students learn repair techniques at Cat Tail Run School for Bookbinding Arts near Winchester.



Speaking volumes: The Handley Regional Library, designed by New York architects in the Beaux-Arts style, celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.

Our first lesson involved covering a skewer with glue and inserting it into the narrow channel along the joint, to strengthen the book's hinges. Throughout the day, we convened for short demonstrations and then used our own books to attempt the techniques — such as stiffening up frayed corners and edges with a glue-paste mixture. The work was tedious, and everything required patience. I spent hours with tiny, paste-saturated pieces of colored Japanese paper, smoothing them onto corners and trying not to glue the book pages together in the process.

We learned how to use a hair dryer and a scalpel to remove tape from a book; how to use acrylic paints and wax to tint the binding; how to flatten a folded document in a do-it-yourself humidity chamber; and how to use gold foil tape to

stamp a line on the spine — and then make it look 100 years old. The lesson of the day: The best repairs look like they're not there at all.

That evening, I drove toward town along Apple Pie Ridge Road, a reminder that I was in orchard country. The heart of Winchester is a two-block pedestrian mall along Loudoun Street that recently underwent a \$7.1 million renovation, making it look very tidy and drawing townsfolk to dinner and outdoor events. The businesses are a mix of new (sushi) and old (19th-century revolvers). Back at my hotel, I realized that I still had acrylic paint under my fingernails.

At the workshop the next day, we turned our attention from cloth covers to leather, learning similar techniques for repair and coloring. Jill showed us how to use a porcupine quill and a tacking iron

to smooth out dog-eared pages. We watched her replace the top of a spine, beveling and shaping a patch of leather as if it were chocolate frosting.

Another instructor demonstrated the fragility of old leather: She wiped a cotton rag down the spine of an 1886 book, removing a swath of pomegranate-colored dust. "Everything wants to become dust," Jill told us. "All we're doing is trying to slow that down."

I went back to my workstation with a palette and mixed burnt sienna with a few other colors to match the cover of my beat-up 1837 "The Anatomy of Melancholy." By the end of the day, I was pleased with at least one of my corners and my paint job, and I had enough knowledge to know what repairs a book needed or — *maybe* — whether it's already been restored. Most importantly, I will never again question a bookbinder's charges or turnaround time.

We wrapped up the class, and I headed to the Handley Regional Library in town, where I ran into Matt, the IT guy from class. We were both interested in the archives, so with a few minutes till closing, we sat across the table from each other flipping through old books. "You could fix this, Melanie," he said, examining a heavily worn tome. I laughed and told him that I was now happy just to know what an endcap is.

I pulled out a 1925 volume, "The Story of Winchester in Virginia," and learned that the town had had two bookbinderies in 1787. Then I looked at the cover. The front was splitting at the joint, the corners were worn, and I imagined shooting some paste inside with a syringe. Then I rotated the book and examined the spine with my newfound eagle eye. Could it be? Clear packing tape held the spine together.

I cringed and shook my head at Matt, aware that he could feel my pain.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer in Washington. Her Web site is www.melaniemdgkaplan.com.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Winchester is about 75 miles from Washington; the bindery is about 10 miles north of town. From the Beltway, take Virginia Route 267 west to Exit 1A and merge onto U.S. Route 15 south/Va. Route 7 west, following it to Interstate 81 north. Take Exit 317, turn left onto U.S. Route 11 south and follow signs for U.S. Route 522 north toward Frederick Pike. Turn right onto Route 654/Cedar Grove Road. The bindery is about four miles on the right.

STAYING THERE

The George Washington

103 E. Piccadilly St.
540-678-4700

www.wyndham.com

The only hotel in the historic downtown area. Rates start at \$105 during the week, \$149 on weekends.

Old Waterstreet Inn

217 W. Boscawen St.

540-665-6777

www.oldwaterstreetinn.com

Five-room 19th-century inn a couple of blocks from the pedestrian mall. Rates start at \$140 a night, including breakfast.

EATING THERE

Bonnie Blue

334 W. Boscawen St.

540-686-7490

www.bonnieblue.us

Despite the giant smoker outside, this is more than a new barbecue joint. Inside the restored 1920s Esso station you'll find catfish (\$9.99), shrimp and grits (\$11.99) and amazing biscuits, sides, desserts and pickled/canned veggies.

El Centro

1 N. Loudoun St.

540-313-4583

www.elcentrova.com

A new Mexican restaurant with a large patio and occasional live music. Classics include fajitas (from \$13.99) and tacos (\$8.25).

PLAYING THERE

Cat Tail Run Hand Bookbinding

2160 Cedar Grove Rd.

540-662-2683

www.cattailrun.com

Upcoming workshops: Basic Structural Repairs, July 18-19, \$235; Advanced Cloth Binding Restoration, Sept. 12-13, \$265; Clamshell Box Construction, Oct. 10-11, \$265.

Handley Regional Library

100 W. Piccadilly St.

540-662-9041

www.handleyregional.org

The archives of this 100-year-old library have an extensive collection of materials on the lower Shenandoah Valley starting in 1732.

INFORMATION

www.visitwinchesterva.com

www.oldtownwinchesterva.com

— M.D.G.K.