



Heritage NL



Knitting Together Business & Heritage with **Christine LeGrow**

Living Heritage Economy
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Christine LeGrow was born and raised in Newfoundland, and has a keen interest in the people, places, and things that make this island unique. A life-long knitter, her company Spindrift Handknits produces over 30 regular hand-knit wool products across a diverse product line. The business is supported by rural knitters throughout the island who make extensive use of traditional patterns that have been handed down through generations.



Christine LeGrow started knitting when she was six years old, getting her first instruction from two women: her mother and her teacher at Bishop Spencer College in St. John's, where she attended Kindergarten to Grade Nine.

It was an all-girls school; it was very strict! It taught you all of life's lessons, including your reading, writing, and arithmetic. It taught you everything, including knitting and all sorts of crafts. Mrs. Garland did the formal knitting class. In Grade Two we started with a cotton dishcloth: a dishcloth knit out of the shopping string that old-fashioned stores used to wrap up ham, bologna, and things like that. I have very fond associations with shopping string! Mrs. Garland was left-handed, and a lot of people thought left-handed people couldn't knit. We had 42 girls in the class, and there were only probably three or four of them who were left-handed, I being one of them! She was successful in teaching me how to knit, and then she became our Grade Three teacher, and at that point she started teaching us other things as well. My mom had given me some Beehive wool to knit with, and I used that to practice my cast-on garter stitch. But my mom was right-handed, and I was hot-tempered and very stubborn! It took the combination of the left-handed teacher

and the right-handed mother to turn me into a knitter!

In 1984, Christine started a knitting business called Knitters Anonymous. A juried member of the Craft Council of NL, she decided she would sell her knitwear at the Council's annual craft fair. Her business started there, with about eight people, mostly family and coworkers. Around 2002, Christine decided the company needed a fresh start in order to grow. The company went through a name change and a switch away from knitting sweaters towards traditional hand knits: caps, scarves, mittens, and socks.

I had decided I liked designing knitwear because not all the modern world would be interested in just traditional knits. I figured you had to have a cross over. You had to hook the new generation on to knitting, and knitted goods and you weren't just going to do it with old fashioned patterns. So I branched into that. Knit caps in particular were very trendy so I designed quite a few of those. Trigger mitts were always popular as menswear, but there weren't really a lot of trigger mitts that fit ladies, so I started going into fancy colours and elbow-length trigger mitts for ladies.



What are *Trigger Mitts?*

“It’s a double warm mitt because it is knit with two balls of wool, one stitch at a time so it has almost a thermal effect on your hand. ‘Trigger mitt’ is a nickname, because it has a thumb, the forefinger, and then the other three fingers are encased in what is shaped like a traditional top of a mitten. I have been asked, ‘Do you have any of those five finger mittens?’ And I said, ‘Oh you mean gloves?’ They said, ‘No, you know the ones with the fancy patterns on them, with the thumb, the finger, and the other three fingers. You know, Newfoundland mittens!’”

I tweaked the pattern a little bit. Now you could always buy the odd pair of double ball mitts for children at church sales, and you could buy double ball mitts for women in lots of places but they tended not to have the trigger finger. They had the classic mitten shape. I just sat down with a pencil and a piece of graph paper and I worked out the math of how many stitches you would need with that particular weight of yarn to fit a lady’s hand instead of a man’s hand. Then I cut down the chart diagrams mathematically, fitting what I could into the stitches that would fit on the front of a lady’s hand, down to the top of their knuckles. It was just a process of arithmetic with a sheet of paper and a pencil. Then I just sat down and knit them and said, “Yeah that works”, then I knit them again, then I typed it up on the computer.

Since 2015, Christine’s has expanded her business to include her take on traditional knitting patterns. Today it represents approximately 10% of her business, with the remaining 90% still based on selling finished product. In patterns, Christine sees a growing market, in part due to current fashions and interest in knitting.

Knitting is super trendy these days. Everybody knits: people knit in public, there is a worldwide knit-in-public day, people sit on subways and knit, they sit in parks and knit. Years ago people just sat in the privacy of their home, like it was

some dirty little secret, and did some knitting. Or it was nan sitting in a chair knitting. But knitting isn’t like that anymore. People go out and it is a social event now. The reality in old Newfoundland was that nobody had formally written down the patterns. If you want to save a traditional craft, you need to get it on paper. You need to print it, because technology keeps changing. About a decade ago I met Shirley Anne Scott and we had a similar goal to preserve Newfoundland knitting patterns. We wanted a printed form that you could take out and put in a museum if you wanted.



Their best seller is the “Some Warm Mittens” package, a series of four mitten patterns developed in collaboration between Spindrift and “Shirl the Purl” — Shirley Scott, author of *Canada Knits: Craft and Comfort in a Northern*

Land. Christine attributes its popularity to the inclusion of the pattern for the Labrador Diamond Number Two trigger mitt. She says, “That’s the one that’s the most recognizable for consumers. They go, ‘There is that mitten that you see everywhere.’”

Christine and Shirley’s most recent collaboration is their 2018 book, *Saltwater Mittens from the Island of Newfoundland: More than 20 Heritage Designs to Knit* published by Boulder Publications, an independent Canadian book publishing company headquartered in Newfoundland and Labrador. Recognizing the value of traditional patterns, the duo have expertly and painstakingly recreated more than 20 heritage patterns for today’s

knitter. The patterns are rated by difficulty and varied in style, including trigger mitts, wristers, five-finger mittens (a.k.a. gloves), thumbless mitts for wee ones, and, of course, classic mittens for all. The goal of their book is to encourage the transmission and celebration of this heritage art form.

I had decades of retail experience but I did not start a knitting business to make a living. I started a knitting business to protect the heritage of knitting in Newfoundland, but I did not want to go in the hole either. I wanted to cover my expenses while I did it. I know that seems really silly to an awful lot of people but my goal was to keep the knitting going.

Her advice to would-be business owners? *Have a five year business plan, and then review it every six months. Know your competition, know your customer base. Do all your market research, do your budget. Find out the cost of all your goods. Keep a record in writing. When you start, go to the Canada Revenue Agency and get yourself a HST business number. Do all your paperwork and start out as a professional from day one. Know the difference between wholesale price, consignment percents, and retail price; you have to have all of that figured out. And finally, you’ve got to love whatever that business is, because if you own a business you may never get a day off for the rest of your life!*

Christine on Sheep Wool

“I think hand knits, particularly out of sheep wool, is very important for protecting the story of our survival in a really cold, damp climate, and how important those one or two sheep that somebody owned back in the 1800s were to keeping hands and feet and bodies warm. That was getting lost, people were forgetting about the actual roots of knitted goods, and how important it was for our survival in this cold, rocky place. In Newfoundland a couple hundred years ago, I don’t think the population would have survived here without wool from sheep to keep their bodies protected from the cold.”

How to find Christine

 /SpindriftHandknits

www.spindriftknits.com

How to find Craft Council of NL

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Prepared by Dale Jarvis, Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Officer for Heritage NL, as part of a series of case studies examining the links between living heritage, traditionality, entrepreneurship, and community economic development in Newfoundland and Labrador. Interview transcription by Terra Barrett.

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Living Heritage Economy Case Study 002. All photos courtesy Christine Legrow and Dale Jarvis.