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Suburban with a spin

BY VALERIE MARINO, STAFF WRITER

Judy Tysmans' ranch home may not look too different on the outside from ones lining cul-de-sacs across western Wake County.

But to many, it is a retreat.

Tysmans and her husband Dirk offer weekend-long "on the farm" workshops at their home just outside Apex town limits, teaching spinning. Their inspiration? The six Romney sheep and Angora goat they keep on their modest two-acre farm they call Shady Grove Farm.

The Tysmans got the animals more than a decade ago, a few years after moving to their home. Sheep were recommended to them by an agriculture extension worker who came to evaluate the property, which had been all but destroyed by the previous owner's horses.

"We came here 18 years ago and it was pretty much nothing but poison ivy," Tysmans said. "Now we have a really nice pasture out here."

The years — and the sheep — have indeed made a difference. What was once hardpacked dirt now boasts lush green grass, a vegetable garden and a bounty of plants. A rose bush borne of the same plant that grew in Tysmans childhood home in Connecticut is blooming



Judy Tysmans takes wool and uses a spinning wheel to spin it into yarn.

Staff photo by Michael McLoone

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Want to learn?

Tysmans' classes costs \$150 for two six-hour workshops or \$190 for an overnight weekend, plus a \$22 start-up kit.

For information on classes, call 387-1375 or e-mail shadygrovefarm@mindspring.com.

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nearby.

"The neighbors are forgiving," Tysmans said, motioning to the calf-high grass of her pasture — what most people would call a backyard. "They don't mind how long it gets. And we rarely have to mow."

The sheep, which over the years have never been used for meat, earn their keep otherwise. Once a year, Dirk corrals the sheep — named Paint, Spot, Black, Susie, Leah and Debra — to shear their long, soft coats.

Tysmans said it would be nearly impossible for her to keep up with the animals without her husband.

"My husband Dirk is really essential to being able to do what we do out here," she said. "The heavy work is just not something I can do very well anymore."

Once the sheep receive their springtime cuts, usually in late April, the fleece is ready to be cleaned, carded and combed before spinning it into yarn to make mittens, sweaters and a bounty of other things.

About once a month, Tysmans teaches others to do the same.

Tysmans offers overnight weekend workshops where her students learn about the history of fiber, preparing the fleece, using a spinning wheel and dyeing the yarn in a rainbow's array of colors.

Students are advised to bring boots or old shoes for outside, where they are invited to help take care of the sheep.

Tysmans said many visitors see the workshops as a weekend retreat from their real life. The farm may be just a few miles from the bustling towns and cities, but to feel the warm breeze and hear the sheep grazing nearby makes the distance seem greatly multiplied.

"I think that's why some people really take to the workshops. It's much more a casual lifestyle," she said. "I'm just really glad we can do this. It's nice to have to share."

Sheep, yarn and fibers were not Tysmans' first love.

She learned how to spin as a means of stress busting while earning her master's degree in public health at UNC-Chapel Hill.

A nurse, Tysmans said she pursued the degree in health policy and administration to learn the inner workings of the business of running a hospital and why things are done they way they are.

Frustrated, Tysmans said she learned that many of the decisions that disturbed her were made for financial reasons. "At least [now] I understand it and I can choose to never work in it again," she said. "It dismays me to no end to see the needs of the patients and not being able to meet them."

Instead, Tysmans found other ways to help people.

Her last project before retiring last year was a prostate cancer study with UNC. Tysmans traveled much of the state, visiting people in their homes.

At one point while working for the Duke Travel Clinic, Tysmans was asked

to present a paper at a conference in Geneva. Unfortunately, she had priorities to attend to at home.

"I was so honored they'd asked me to do it, but then I realized my sheep was due the same week," she said.

Tysmans, 63, retired in December when her grant at UNC ended and she found it difficult to get a new project.

Tysmans said she's not quite ready to settle down yet.

"I'm not really sure what I'm going to do for my next life yet," she said.

For now, she's volunteering at the Holly Springs Library, teaching her workshops and working with the New Hill Community Association to try to keep the Town of Cary and others from building a sewage treatment plant in the area, another cause she is passionate about.

"This may not be luxury out here to a lot of people," Tysmans said, surveying her property. "But it's comfortable and we enjoy it."

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