



Yarn bomber wants to 'wake people up'



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The bookshelves and book carts at the Goodman South Madison Library must have looked a little chilly to Katey Smith.

Smith, a University of Wisconsin-Madison senior, and her [team of "yarn bombers"](#) have been knitting and crocheting colorful sweaters for normally unadorned items at the Goodman Library. The project was funded by a city of Madison BLINK! grant, and is part of a growing trend of "textile

graffiti" nationwide.

Starting in mid-May, browsers at the Goodman may find a [little crocheted caterpillar](#) next to "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," or lovely blue and green patterns covering a formerly bare book cart.

Smith's [Facebook group of knitters](#) (YarnbombWI) currently has 70 members, a handful of whom have met each Thursday since early March to knit/crochet together. (The next meetup is April 18.)

Yarn bombing, also known as guerrilla or graffiti knitting, turns a private, often solitary hobby into a public work of art. In cities from Vancouver, B.C. to Toledo, Ohio, yarn bombers wrap parking meters, bike racks, bus shelters and cherry trees in bright patterns.

"It's blowing up," said Smith, who has been crocheting since she was nine years old.

The goal of Smith's project, which installs in the Goodman Library on May 10, is twofold. Smith wants to get people interested in the tradition of knitting and crocheting — "people think it's for old ladies," she said, but the spontaneity and creativity of yarn bombing gets younger people excited.

Her second goal has something in common with public sculpture and flash mobs.

"People are on autopilot," Smith said. "When you walk through a busy public setting, you're making to-do lists in your head or you're focused on one thing.

"I want to create things to wake people up, make them notice their surroundings."

Smith's project is funded by a \$500 [BLINK! grant](#), which awards up to \$1,500 for

temporary public art projects in the city. Other examples have included a [street art summer camp for teens](#), a gaggle of [metal birds stationed near the bike path](#) off of John Nolen Drive and, coming this late spring and summer, three “Little Galleries” set to pop up around town.

Karin Wolf, an arts program administrator with the city who works with the Madison Arts Commission, liked Smith’s original idea of yarn bombing bike racks, but suggested partnering with the libraries and gallery coordinator Trent Miller, in part to bring more art to under-served areas of the city.

“I love working with the libraries because they say yes to everything and make it happen,” Wolf said. In 2010, the Arts Commission gave a BLINK! grant to cover a bus shelter on the Capitol Square, a project coordinated with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Design Gallery.

Those knitters were inspired by [Magda Sayeg](#), who founded “Knitta, Please” in Houston in 2005. Sayeg has [yarn bombed](#) a bus in Mexico, a bridge in France and a street cart in Taiwan.

“People all over the country are treating it like a movement,” said Liz Krueger, a city zoning inspector and a member of Smith’s Thursday night group at the branch library.

“I’ve heard interesting discussions ... is it considered graffiti if it’s not pre-approved?” Krueger said. “What are the implications? There can be kind of a social commentary about it.”

Smith hopes to get covered book carts in every city branch library, with various themes — the yarn bombers are making an “[underwater](#)” cart in blue and green, and a UW cart covered in red and white. She used the BLINK! money to buy yarn, and has had several donations of afghans and scarves that people didn’t want anymore.

“Once the yarn bombing is done and is up for awhile, we’re going to deconstruct everything and reconstruct them in blankets and scarves,” Smith said. Those will be donated to the Community Action Coalition or another local nonprofit.

Before that, the yarn bombs will move to various libraries in the system. Not everything is book-related. Krueger found a bike that her neighbor was getting rid of and decided to cover it in yarn. It will likely make the library rounds too.

“It’s really cool to see how other people are taking a piece of yarn and turning it into something incredible,” Krueger said. “It’s not just scarves and afghans anymore.”

More on yarn bombing

“Cozy Shelter” (2010) [by the UW-Madison Design Gallery](#) (also funded by a BLINK! grant)

TIME’s [Q&A with yarn artist Olek](#), Feb. 22, 2013

TIME Photo Gallery: [The Fine Art of Yarn Bombing](#)

"[Graffiti's Cozy, Feminine Side](#)" in the New York Times, May 18, 2011