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Passion Discovered Amidst Valley and Mountain Folds

May 12, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University alumna Kathy Knapp '69, is proof that education doesn't end with graduation. Knapp, who graduated with a nursing degree from IWU, worked as a nurse for Caterpillar Inc., and the State of Illinois Zeller Zone, a mental health center, before discovering a new hobby that has now become her profession and her passion.

While volunteering as a nurse in 1989 at the Art and Science Day Camp in the Woods in rural Washburn, Ill., that her three children were attending, Knapp spent her free time folding basic origami shapes that she had learned as a child. After prompting from the camp director, Knapp began teaching simple folds to the campers, while continuing to learn herself.

Today, nearly 25 years later, Knapp has mastered complex shapes and sophisticated folds, owns over 500 origami books in various languages and attends origami conventions. In 2007, she founded Origami Peoria Area, a monthly group for local folders to learn from one another.



Three variations of spinners, folded by Knapp and designed by (left to right) Kyoko Makahara and Taichiro Hasegawa, Makoto Yamaguchi and Aso Reiko and Hasegawa.



Knapp peaking out behind one of her designs, a modular of sonobe units, called an icosahedron.

For those unfamiliar with the art form, origami is the Japanese word for paper folding. According to the British Origami Society website, the earliest known example of folding was an Egyptian map made from papyrus, the early form of paper, in 1150 B.C. The Society estimates that recreational paper folding probably began in Japan around 1600, with solid evidence in the 17th century. Some of the first folds included the classic crane, boxes, boats and hats. Since then, the Japanese art form has expanded to include almost every shape imaginable.

Knapp also teaches origami classes at Illinois Central College, nursing homes, 4-H Clover Clinics, and to Girl Scout and Cub Scout Troops and various women's groups. For her work, she was awarded the 2010 Ranana Benjamin Award by Origami USA, which is given to an outstanding origami teacher, particularly of children.

"I teach to support my [origami] habit," said Knapp. "And I teach because I just love those 'aha' moments when someone just gets it. It's rewarding to see people succeed."

Knapp, who began learning the skill from how-to books from the library, understands the difficulties of learning origami.

"Origami is not just a craft, it's an art," said Knapp. "It uses a lot of math and has its own language, which anyone that folds understands."

Knapp begins her students with basic folds and simple bases such as triangles or squares. For children, she almost always begins with the folding of a frog, which, when folded correctly, can hop.

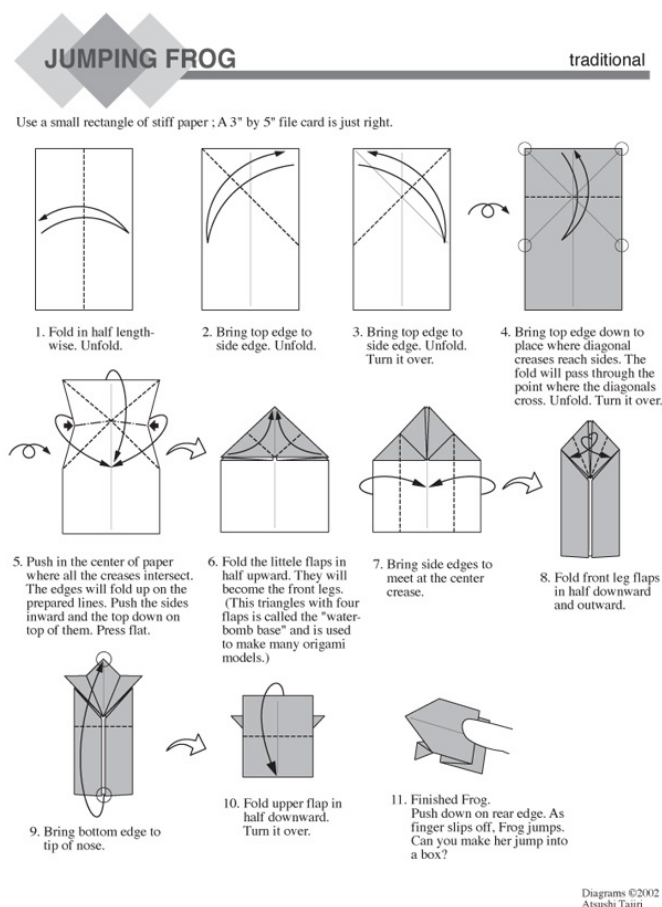
"I don't like to teach from diagrams," said Knapp. "I want the students to focus on the step I'm on, and I don't move on until everyone has the concept."

With beginning level students, Knapp has been able to teach them how to make baskets, drinking cups, French fries and fish. She has personally folded such challenging shapes as a PHiZZ modular, which is shaped like a ball and composed of 60 units intertwined like lattice work. This intricate design took her nearly four hours to complete. She has also folded an origami peace tree, which she donated to a fundraising-event.



A gold saar star that Knapp folded from tissue foil.

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A diagram of a jumping frog, one of the beginning folds that Knapp teaches to her students.