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going to the  
Yarn Basket

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Branford shop is  
a haven for knitters

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

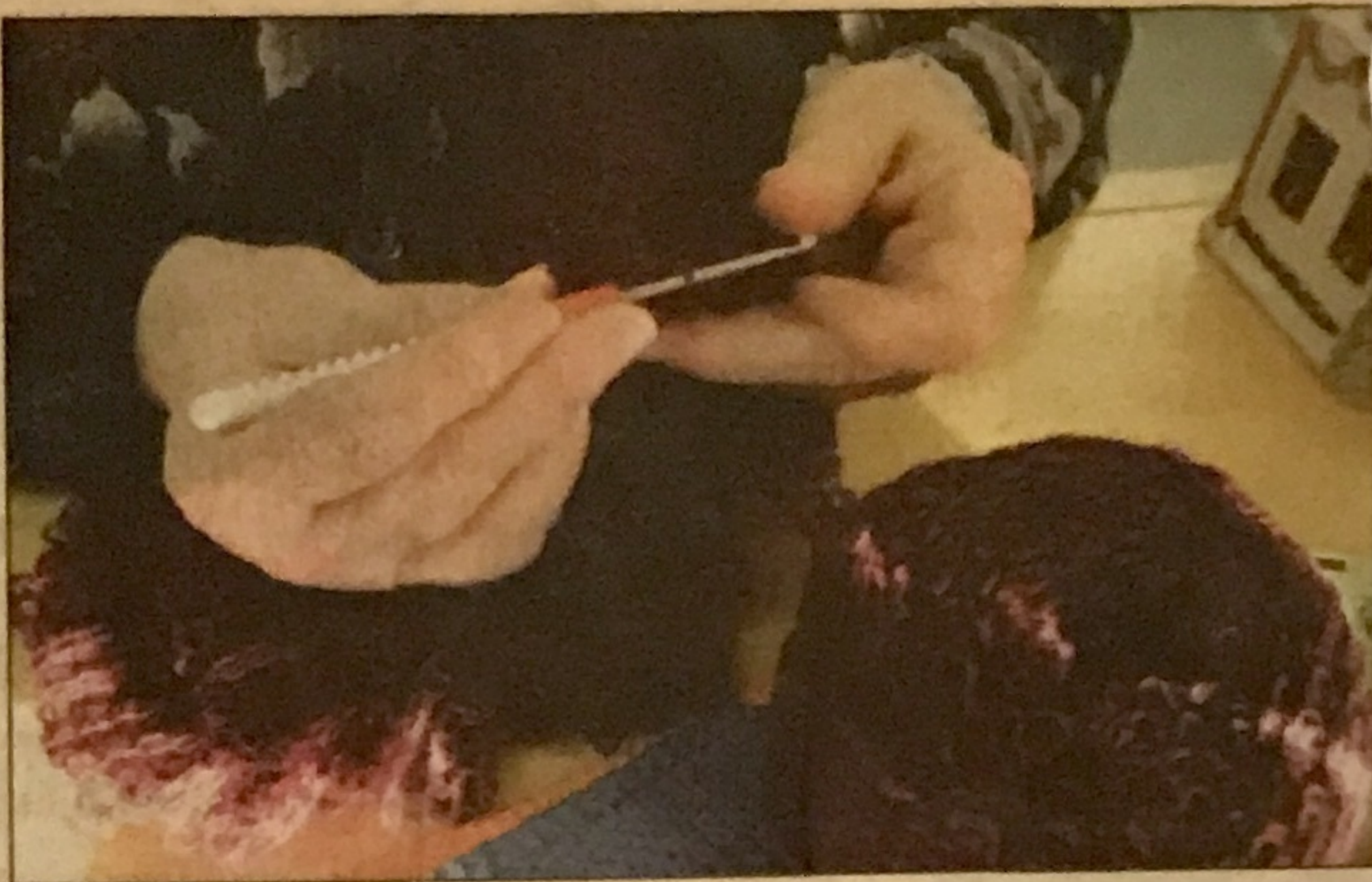
When Mary Ellen Norton first approached the entrance of the Yarn Basket in Branford, she felt ill at ease. A teacher at Branford Hall Institute, she had a three-hour break between her classes. She lived in Cromwell, an hour away. She was also an avid knitter and had a project in the works. The trouble was that she hadn't bought the yarn at the Yarn Basket.

The alternatives weren't enticing. Three hours on a molded plastic chair at Dunkin' Donuts? Drinking cup after cup of weak coffee at a nearby diner? Loitering in the lobby at the Holiday Inn?

"The people at the Yarn Basket couldn't have cared less that the yarn wasn't theirs," Norton recalled on a recent Friday afternoon as a group of women chatted over the clinks of needles and the strains of soothing music at a table in the mellow light of the shop. "And they couldn't have been more welcoming," she added, singling out the legendary Marlene Rusconi, the gracious septuagenarian who runs the operation. Norton has been coming back ever since.

Maybe it's the rainbow of rich-

ly textured yarns that cram the shelves of the unassuming space in the Mewes Shoppes on Route 1, like the chunky candy-colored wool from Peru; the Bamboo wool with the coolness and smoothness of silk; and a ribbon yarn that lends a certain pizzazz to accessories and is taking the



Yarn Basket employee Marlene Rusconi of Killingworth shows off her favorite new yarn. Photo by Mara Lavitt



At the Yarn Basket in Branford, store patrons left to right: Mary Ellen Norton of Cromwell shows Abbe Leavitt of Guilford center and Carol Ursini of Cheshire right how to knit in the Continental style. Photo by Mara Lavitt.

knitting world by storm. There's a yarn called cashmerino made by Debbie Bliss, who's known for her cuddly designs for children, and another that sparkles with metallic threads.

"This isn't your mother's yarn," said the congenial, white-haired co-owner Warren Gohsler.

"It's nothing like the stiff, old yarn. Or the low-end acrylic kind sold at big-discount stores."

According to Gohsler, it's the new generation of high-style designs and increasingly exotic and vibrantly colored yarns that

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# Yarn Basket: Not your grandmother's yarn store

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in part has fueled the resurgence of interest in the ancient craft, with over 50 million Americans knitters and crocheters, according to recent estimates by the Yarn Craft Council, among them such celebrities as Julia Roberts, Cameron Diaz, and Madonna.

"These new yarns allow even a beginner to make something spectacular right out of the gate," he said. "They really encourage people to be creative without having to learn complicated stitches. Once someone completes, say, a scarf, that person is emboldened to try more complex patterns." And for more advanced knitters like Mary Ellen Norton, "the quality is so much higher than before. Which makes knitting a throw or an afghan a luxurious experience."

Then there are the collateral benefits of knitting. While known for elevating its practitioners into a Zen-like state, knitting also sharpens the mind. Aside from the vast array of yarn colors, there are thousands of stitches to master, hundreds of fibers to consider, and all kinds of needles for entirely different looks. A seasoned knitter like Carol Ursini of Cheshire, who was using a flip chart to keep track of her intricate patterns, has to focus intently to meet the daunting mathematical challenges.

To Guilford's Abbe Leavitt, that's the fun of it. "Once you learn a new technique, you're hungry for that next challenge," she said as the patchwork of women dropped their needles and leaned in to admire the artistry of her

work. "Plus there's nothing more satisfying than creating something out of nothing, and creating it in exactly the colors, the size, and whatever added touches you want."

And there's no denying knitting's meditative qualities. The rhythmic motion of the needles soothes frayed nerves and quiets the noisy world. "Emptying the mind and concentrating only on the next stitch can be healing," said Leavitt who credits knitting for helping her through some recent health issues.

For Mary Ellen Norton, it's an antidote to our cyber-driven society. "Being at this table is all about being connected. With people, with fabric. It's real. Nothing virtual about it."

It's that spirit of tight-knit camaraderie around the communal table that invites people to linger. That's what happened to Carol Antell of Branford when she stopped in for help in deciphering a pattern and stayed on an hour or two to add a few rows to the sweater she's knitting for her husband. "There's always someone who can help you," she said, whether you're grappling with a dropped stitch or an inadvertently skipped one. And if no one can, the call goes out for Marlene Rusconi.

Which is, in the end, what sets Yarn Basket apart. And why so many of its customers keep dropping in, including the legion of disciples that have followed Marlene Rusconi for decades and come from all parts of Connecticut, the eastern seaboard, and as far away as Indiana and Colorado.

It's not just Marlene's uncanny ability to fix what cannot be fixed;

legend has it that she's never been stumped. Or her impossibly high standards. "If it's homemade, it should be perfect," she regularly proclaims. "Mistakes don't give it character." And once you make a mistake, "you know it's there, you'll see it every time you look at it, even if no one else can. So rip it out."

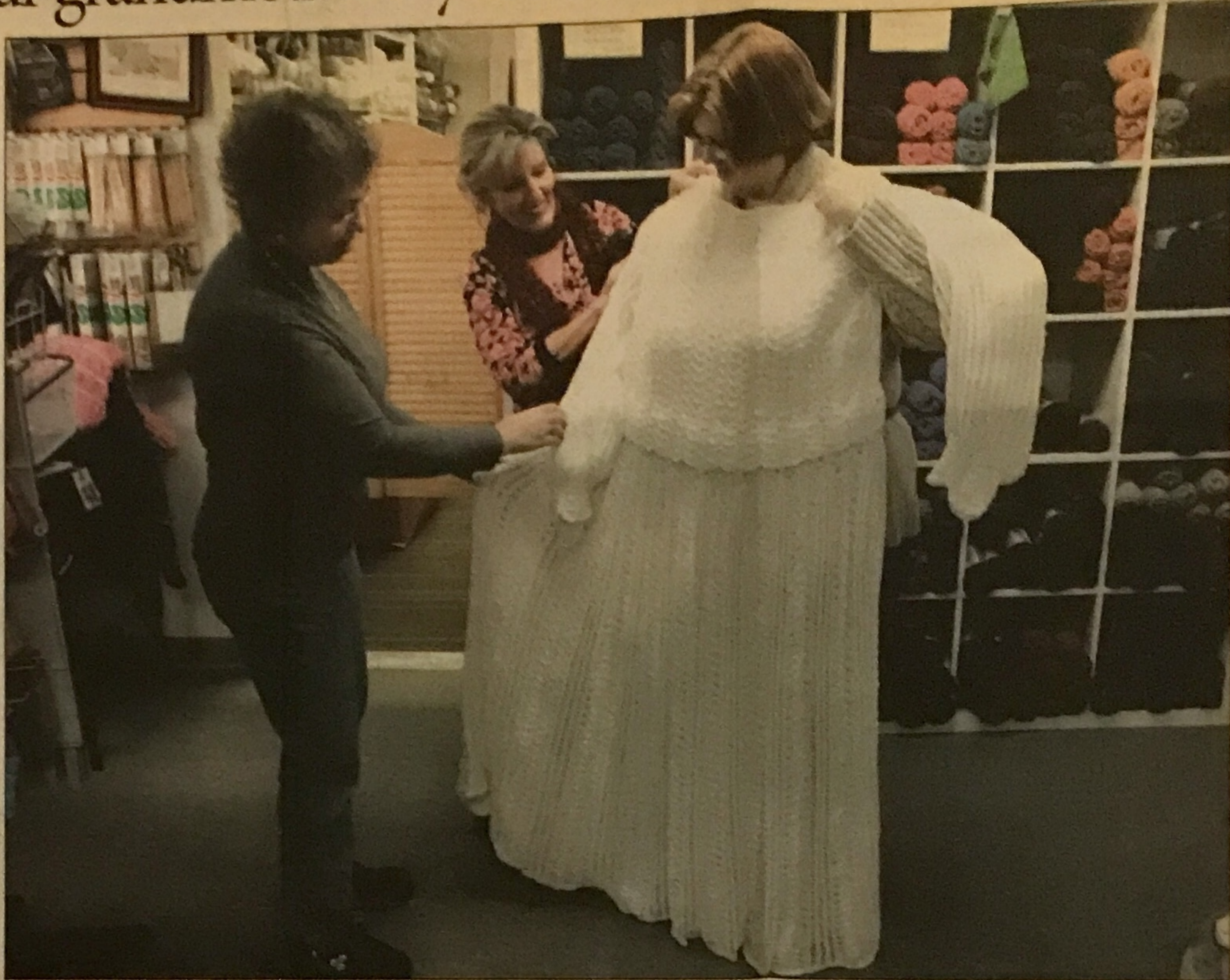
It's also the shop's uncommon commitment to its customers. "We offer something that other shops don't," said Gohsler. "Help and assistance and assurance. If you've stranded a project, bring it in and we'll help you. Even if it's yarn you didn't buy here." As for beginners: "check us out," he said. "It's a happy place filled with wonderful people."

Not that Marlene is pressing anyone to join Mary Ellen Norton and the rest of the revolving

group that peoples the table at the Yarn Basket. "There is a time in your life for knitting," she said.

"And when that time comes, we'll be here." Visit the Yarn Basket at 288 E. Main Street,

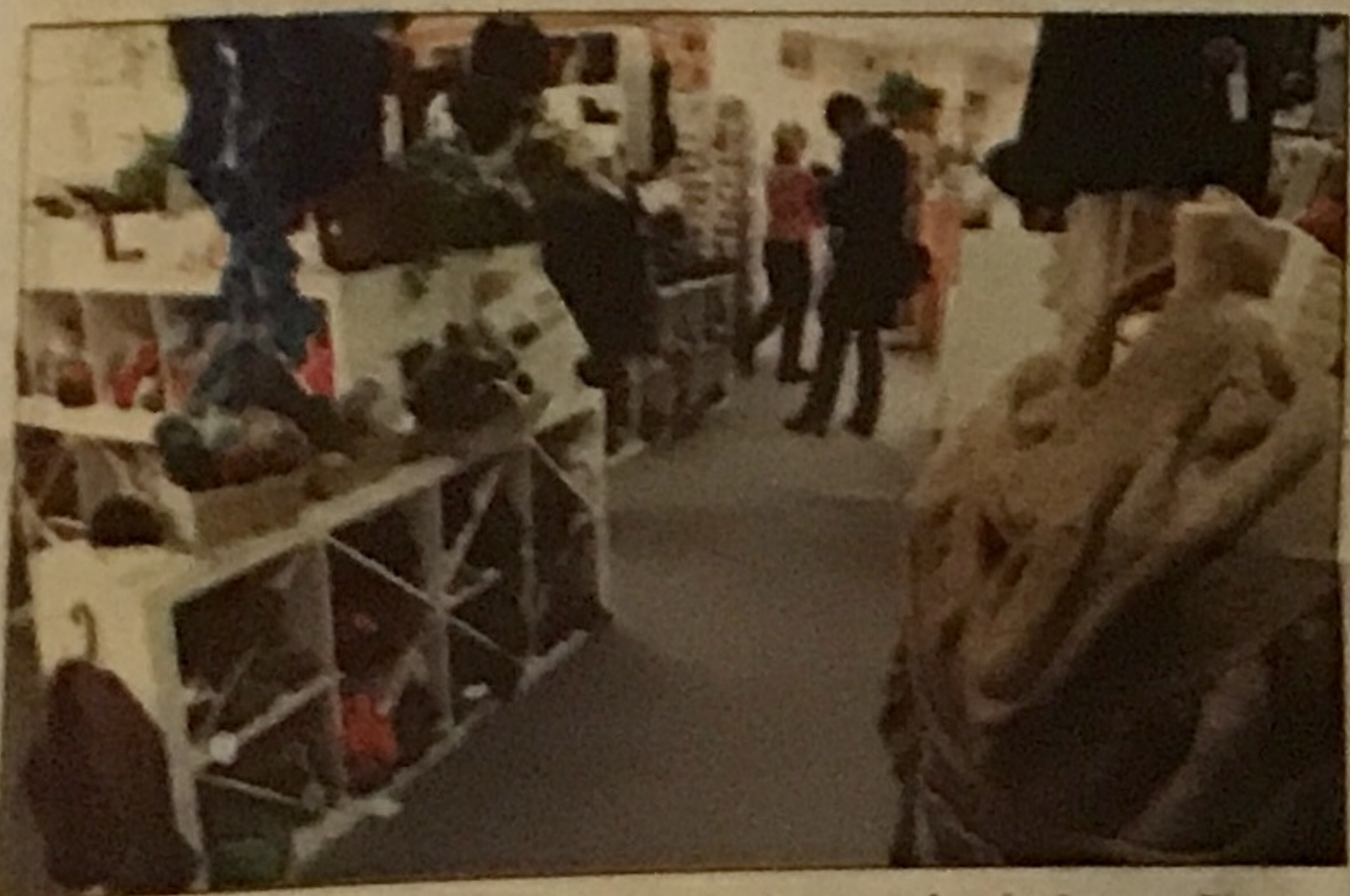
Branford, phone: 203-208-3288, or check them out online at [yarnbasketct.com](http://yarnbasketct.com).



From left, Abbe Leavitt and Margaret Girshick both of Guilford admire a wedding dress knitted by store employee Marlene Rusconi (not pictured) for her daughter's wedding 22 years ago. Carol Ursini of Cheshire right holds the dress.



Owner Warren Gohsler of Guilford right speaks with longtime friend and employee Marlene Rusconi of Killingworth.



The Yarn Basket in Branford is a haven for knitters. Photos by Mara Lavitt.