



The LYS: Cool Spaces

There have been yarn shops in hospitals and libraries, basements and barns. We hadn't heard of one located in a jail, though, until now. The culprit: **Happy Knits**, an LYS that will soon occupy the former Somerset County Jail in Skowhegan, Maine.

In the two-plus years since the last inmates were moved to a nearby correctional facility, the jail has been spruced up as the Somerset Grist Mill—a new marketplace/social environment anchored by a working gristmill, meant to enliven sleepy downtown Skowhegan.

“I love the idea of renovating an old space instead of seeing it bulldozed and turned into a crazy ugly place,” says Happy Knits founder **Julie Cooke**, who's excited to introduce fellow Skowhegan residents to knitting as a community activity. “There's a lot of buzz about this place, which is smack in the center of town.” Conceived as a “small-business incubator,” the mill will eventually incorporate a farmers' market, a pottery studio and other eclectic shops.

Happy Knits is the facility's flagship retail tenant, renovating the footprint that was once the jail's visitor room and command center. Cooke combined the contact and no-contact areas, taking down the Plexiglas that once separated inmates from their visitors, painting the institutional-gray cement walls a pleasant shade of purple and turning the area around a wood stove heater into a sit-and-knit class section.

Cooke, a stay-at-home, home-schooling mom who grew up in Skowhegan, is bootstrapping the shop on her own, banking on the area's robust knitting, crocheting and spinning population to embrace the town's first LYS. “There's been a big push lately to support local farmers and local businesses,” she says. As such, Cooke will be carrying yarn from several nearby farms alongside Cascade, Brown Sheep, Berroco, Noro and the like. She'll also offer items like knit cloth-diaper pants on consignment.

“In our small town, people go to school, to work, to bars; we needed somewhere else to go,” Cooke explains. By opening the shop, she gets to “pave the way for something huge happening in town. It will be fun to watch it unfold.” At press time, Cooke was waiting for utilities to be installed to announce an opening date. Keep up with Happy Knits at **PeaceLoveHappyKnits.com**.