

She's "repairing America one chair at a time;" Kautz-LaPorte also makes baskets

By Linda Carman

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Paula Kautz-LaPorte will either sell you a bus ticket from behind her counter at the Bennington, Vt., bus station or she'll weave a seat for your chair. Kautz-LaPorte started caning chair seats as an experiment in handiwork. A friend's great-aunt had passed away, leaving a women's Lincoln rocker that was a handywoman's special. "I'm a scavenger, so I took it, and I went out and bought a book and supplies," Kautz-LaPorte said. "I still have the chair in my bedroom, and, when I have a chance to sit down and read a book, that's where I sit." That was many years ago and her experiment has evolved into a business. "I came to work part time here, and I was reading a lot of books," she recalled. "I started working on my chairs here, and people started asking if I'd do their's. When I started, I could only do one chair a week." This past Saturday morning, Kautz-LaPorte was weaving a rush seat for a gold-stencilled black Hitchcock chair. "This chair will take me two days to weave and finish," she said. To preserve the material, she coats the seat with shellac. "Shellac's been used forever." A splint seat will take at least one day's weaving, with another for two or three coats and drying time, she said. And weaving a seat with Shaker-style tape takes a day. Her hands are strong and smooth, although she said splints leave an occasional splinter. "It's tough on my shoulders," she said. To achieve the proper tension, she has to pull the material tight. "I love to see the finished product," she said. "I've always liked furniture," she said, noting that "really old chairs are really uncomfortable." "This gives me an opportunity to be creative. I've always liked working with my hands," she said. "I try not to be part of the throwaway society," she said. "One gentleman told me, 'You're repairing America one chair at a time.' "My kids are proud that I do it. We have a number of chairs around the house, and my daughter will tell her friends, 'my mother did this one, and this one.' And they've told me their friends think it's cool." "It's a very old trade," she said. "The term 'rush' refers to bullrushes. In this country we use cattails." Referring to one of several books she keeps behind the counter, Kautz-LaPorte said natural rush seating can be traced to 4000 B.C. in Egypt, where woven boxes, chests and baskets were woven from bull rushes, cattails and marsh flags.

Cane chairs are believed to have originated in China, she said. Kautz-LaPorte uses mainly rattan from Indonesia. "It grows hundreds of feet long," she said, showing a visitor a short section of the vine, about 1 1/2 inches thick. "That's what wicker is," she said. "Rattan comes from the inside, cane from the outside, where it gets its high-gloss finish." One of her books is titled *The Caner's Handbook*, written by Bruce W. Miller and Tim Widess and published by Lark Books. "Most bookstores have at least one book on weaving chair seats, and libraries have them," she said. On average a chair seat costs \$100-plus, depending on the size and materials. A rocker with a woven back as well as a seat will cost twice that amount. "I love working with Shaker tape, and with bull rushes that I have to twist," she said. Most people opt for pretwisted rush because that costs less. "The leaves have such a nice fragrance and color." "I like when somebody brings in a chair I've never done before, so I have to learn a new pattern," she said. Her most unusual project was a pair of what she called plantation lounge chairs, with hinged leg rests and boot pulls. Her fondness for tackling new techniques and projects is evidenced on the walls of the tiny wooden bus station, in the form of baskets of various shapes and sizes, some of which are displayed next to the schedule of arrivals and departures. Three years ago, according to the label she includes with each, she started weaving baskets "to explore elements of form and function, color and texture." A small wall basket costs \$15, while a larger basket is \$45. Her most recent productions are fishing creels, woven of rattan, with nylon straps and a copper latch, for just over \$100. "Two drivers asked if I'd make them," she said. As if on cue, Saturday morning, one of those drivers, Tom Haney, headed for Binghamton, N.Y., stopped at the station. The creel, Haney said, is "nice, gorgeous, awesome, perfect." "For me it's a decorative piece, too," said Haney, who displays it with an arrangement of old bamboo poles and an antique print of a brook trout. "They're so neat. You line it with grass and ferns and just dip it in the stream." "It's certainly beautiful work," he said. "A lot of work." Kautz-LaPorte said, "We grow asparagus so I just designed an asparagus basket. You can rinse the asparagus right in the basket." "I'm trying to find more and more local materials," she said, showing an "experiment with horsetail and red willow, with rattan to hold it together." Again she turned to books. "A gentleman who sells old books comes through here," she said, showing an 1899 edition of *Cane Basket Work*, which was printed in England and has a front cover that's ornately embossed. "I'm at the point now where I understand the techniques, and I can modify the designs," she said. "Every basket is different from another." A favorite source for basket-making is *The Basket Book*, written by Lyn Siler and published by Sterling/Lark. Kautz-LaPorte said that when she started making baskets, it was "sometimes overwhelming. It was hard to get it to hold its shape. You just have to keep going with it. But in the beginning, it's very intimidating. A basket is not perfect or imperfect. Each basket stands on its own." The array of tools on the wall behind the counter include "some kitchen tools. There's a nutpick I use all the time," she said. Kautz-LaPorte grew up in the mountains of Passaic, N.J., where, she recalled, "our yard went right into the woods." Then she moved to Hohokus, where the schools were good. She moved to Vermont at age 19 with a group of friends, living in what she called "a relaxed boarding house. I think they've gone, but I'm still here," she said. As if to illustrate the variety of her workday, she interrupted her conversation to sell a ticket to a man planning to travel to Tupelo, Miss. "I've sold tickets to Seattle, to Portland, to places in California, and to Texas near the Mexican border," she said. "People travel all over the world by bus. If I had all the money in the world, I'd like to visit the different cultural pockets where baskets are still made, and be taught by the people who make them. That's the way everyone learned in the past. The skills were handed down. "But I get my information from books," she said, "and, probably, I won't hand it down." Kautz-LaPorte can be contacted at the bus station on Washington Avenue at (802) 442-4808, or at home at (802) 442-6006.