

Unfinished business

MEET THE **LOOSE ENDS PROJECT**, A NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION THAT CONNECTS VOLUNTEER MAKERS WITH GRIEVING FAMILIES WHO WANT A LOVED ONE'S WORK IN PROGRESS TO BE FINISHED AFTER THEY ARE GONE

When a crafter dies, chances are they will leave behind unfinished projects that had been destined for family and friends. A US-based non-profit organisation aims to transform those unfinished reminders of a loved one's passing into lasting memorials of their love and skills. The Loose Ends Project invites grieving families and friends to submit unfinished projects that have been left behind and match these to a legion of finishers all around the world.

The Loose Ends Project has been around for less than three years and has already facilitated the completion of more than 3,500 handwork projects. It has more than 32,000 volunteer finishers all over the world able to tackle textile crafts from knitting and crochet to quilting and rug hooking. It was founded by knitters and non-profit entrepreneurs Masey Kaplan (pictured below left), based in Falmouth, Maine, and Jennifer Simonic (below right), based in Seattle, Washington.



PHOTOGRAPHY © WINKY LEWIS

Masey says: 'Handmade items are gestures of love. The time, expense and skill that go into making them are impossible to quantify. When you wear something made especially for you, it feels good – the recipient of a handmade gift is thoughtfully considered with each stitch. When a maker dies mid-project, this tangible, handmade expression of love could get lost, donated or thrown out. Loose Ends volunteers' goals are to finish these projects as intended and give them back to be used and cherished.'

During the Covid-19 pandemic two friends of Masey's both lost their mothers. 'For one of them, I was able to finish her mom's sweater and give it back to her,' she recalls. 'It felt amazing to be able to do that for someone, because when somebody is hurting like that you can't really take that away. You cook, you bring food, but it was amazing to have this other skill that I could employ to offer that kind of comfort for her. When I gave it back to her, it just felt to her like she was surrounded by her mom's love. It felt like a hug from her mom. We hear this over and over now, because Loose Ends exists.' She adds: 'I believe it is a gift to be able to be generous to someone else. To be able to give is its own gift.'

CRAFTING CONNECTIONS

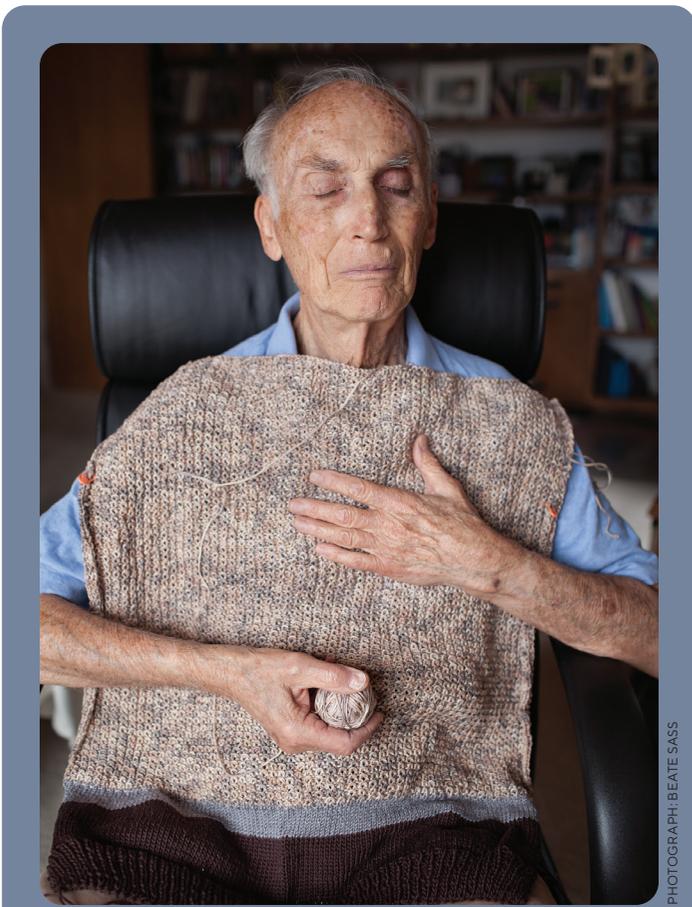
This experience got Masey and her friend Jen, who had also finished projects for friends' deceased loved ones, thinking about creating a network to connect people with unfinished projects lurking in houses all over the world. 'Probably nearby there is somebody who knows how to finish it, whether that person knows the bereaved person or not,' Masey says. One day the two met at a mutual friend's house for a college reunion. The friend's mother had recently died from ovarian cancer, so the pair started helping her to sort out her mum's stash and unfinished projects. This bag included two crocheted blankets which had barely been started, but which the friend's mum had hoped to make for her sons before she died. 'She had been making them while she was having treatment, so there were tight, irregular stitches, but she just wanted to have something for her sons,' Masey says. As they were sorting out the yarn and needle stash, another knitter, Patty, offered to finish the blankets for their friend.

Masey says: 'We were about to divide up the blankets and say we would do them, and Loose Ends was partly born because we didn't want to do that. There was a lot of yarn left and she had only done a little bit. And then the synapses connected.' Masey and Jen decided that Patty's work on the blankets would be the first pilot for the network that would become the Loose Ends Project. At the same time Masey had a couple of unfinished tiny baby sweaters waiting at home, that she just wasn't getting around to finishing for a friend – so she added those into the pilot. The pair went home from the party, built a website and set the project in motion.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

'We had no money to do this, we wanted to do it on the cheap,' she recalls. 'I used a Google Form for people to sign up as finishers and another for people to submit projects. We made flyers and started taking them around to yarn shops, community centres, hospices, the MS foundation, anywhere where people might have projects and might want to know we were doing it. More than 100 people signed up in the first month or so.'





PHOTOGRAPH: BEATE SASS

LOOSE ENDS TIED UP: BEATE'S DAD

I've had a partially finished sweater that my mom started knitting in 2011 for my dad. She died in 2013 and was never able to complete it. I brought it home, thinking I might learn to knit and finish it. I never did.

Loose Ends contacted me today to inform me that they found a knitter in my hometown who has agreed to complete the project. She is going to lay hands on the yarn and sweater pieces that my mom's hands held, with so much love for her husband, my father. Won't my dad be surprised to receive such an unexpected gift on his 99th birthday?

Beate Sass

That was in September 2022, and in December a Seattle local news channel interviewed Jen, and the story also ran on national TV.

'As soon as the press started to roll out and the word got out there, finishers started signing up in droves, because crafters are an amazingly generous population,' Masey says. 'We joke that it is a very introvert-friendly way to connect with your community. People who want to be part of a mission they believe in can do it from their couch. You don't have to go to training or to a meeting. You don't even have to get into your car for the most part.'

Sign-ups grew quickly and the project soon had to revamp its programming. In summer 2023 a story about Loose Ends aired on US National Public Radio in which Jen said 'we are looking at spreadsheets until our eyeballs bleed'. 'All these amazing programmers came out of the woodwork and offered to help us as volunteers,' Masey recalls. Loose Ends is still building out its behind-the-scenes app, which will connect unfinished projects with volunteer finishers in their local areas. 'Once that is done everything is going to get easier,' she says.

The same summer Loose Ends became an official registered non-profit organisation. 'We didn't start out thinking we were going to do that, but it seemed clear that it was the right decision to become a non-profit,' Masey says. 'It was important to us that we keep it so that this was a free service. The whole point was that we wanted to bring people together that have this experience and generosity, not to create a place where people could get projects finished. We didn't want it to be a business.'

GENERATED IN LOVE

She adds: 'I think the world needs to shift into being a more loving place. We aren't political. We don't know what people's politics are or their religion or anything. We don't know net income, skin colour, we don't know any of that stuff about people. We make these matches based on who needs it and who can do it and who wants to do it. We are creating this connection where people are really showing their best side. It is often somebody who is hurting, and somebody who gets to step in and offer support. It was important that it remain a free service. A thing that was generated in love could never be income-driven.'

Now Masey, who has been self-employed for years and has worked in marketing, design and communications for various non-profit organisations, and Jen, a former middle-school science teacher who has also worked for several tech companies, work full-time for Loose Ends along with one part-time project manager who works on the match-making side. Jen and Masey also help with that, as well as 'all the other stuff'. Masey says: 'I do all the social media, maintain the website, do the hiring. Jen does community outreach and corporate sponsorship. I'm working on some grants. There are events and press engagements. All that stuff is divided between the two of us, and we cross over a little bit too.'

The organisation's primary mission remains to match its more than 32,000 registered finishers to projects left behind. There is roughly a 12:1 ratio of finishers to unfinished projects, which means volunteers often have to wait for their first project. But Loose Ends always welcomes more finishers. 'The more finishers the better - we are always welcoming new finishers even though it might appear on the outside as if we have plenty,' Masey says, explaining that ideally they would match people who live close to each other so they can potentially meet in person and establish a connection. 'The statistics

look like there are more than 65 million knitters in just the US, so there must be projects everywhere. And just because you do a craft doesn't mean you do a different craft,' she says. That means that a knitting volunteer might need a different volunteer to finish a quilting or a crochet project.

CORPORATE SPONSORS

When we speak, the Loose Ends Project has been left reeling by the collapse of US craft and hobby store chain Joann Fabric & Crafts in March 2025. 'Joann were our main sponsor,' Masey explains. As well as regularly inviting customers to round up their bills at the till to donate to the project, Joann would supply finishers with any extra supplies they needed, drop-shipping them free of charge from their closest warehouse. 'Their support covered more than 70% of our operating budget, so it is a huge loss,' Masey says. 'We are not going anywhere, but we are going to have to slow down a bit and figure out how we are going [to cover that loss].'

In the wake of this news Masey and Jen are focusing on fundraising and the project is always looking for corporate sponsors. UK-based King Cole is one brand which has helped by making a donation to the project for every ball of its Cottagespun Chunky sold, and US Lion Brand has done a similar thing. Loose Ends is also looking to connect with dyers and designers. One of its volunteers recently released a pattern online, which knitters could download for free or make a donation to Loose Ends. 'US\$3,000 showed up just from this one person choosing to do this thing for us,' Masey says.

The effect of losing its sponsor has been to slow down Loose Ends' matchmaking, so there is currently a waiting list for matches. Before projects can be sent out to finishers the Loose Ends team have to check the state of the WIP, the yarn and tools available and that there is a pattern, all from pictures. But it is ticking the projects off chronologically and the process will run more smoothly once the new technology is in place. Loose Ends is also asking knitters to sign up as volunteers and follow the project on social media.

Find out more and sign up at looseends.org.
Follow [@thelooseendsproject](https://www.instagram.com/thelooseendsproject)



LOOSE ENDS TIED UP: SAMARRA'S OWL SWEATER

My mom Judy was a painter and artist, as am I. I grew up in a creative household where she'd encourage me to make my artwork. She also taught me to knit, although watching her skills always made me think I should stick to basic stuff.

In 2017, my mom and I travelled to see a friend in Maine and went to a yarn shop for supplies for my mom to make this sweater for me. She was a lifelong knitter who had made many a complex sweater for me over the years. I remember being at this shop and asking her if she felt comfortable making it, and I realise now she hesitated – but I didn't realise why. She said: 'Yes, I can make it.' But I didn't sense the confidence she had always had.

She died in October of 2021, after a fast and ugly spiralling battle with dementia. I now realise that in 2017, she very likely was at the beginning of this horrible condition and that was what I was witnessing in the yarn shop with her slight hesitation over the supplies. I've kept everything we bought and the pattern as it all was in the brown bag from the store and just put it all away. When I saw your organisation, I wondered if this might be something that could see completion. My mom managed to roll a ball out of one of the skeins in preparation, but then everything stopped. The entire bag is a reminder of when I began to lose her.

Loose Ends finisher Mikaela Hinterberger (@fraying_at_the_edges) didn't flinch. She made the whole thing from scratch, fulfilling Judy's wishes and making a friend in the process. My beautiful owl sweater is no longer the ending of something, but a new beginning of so many memories and connections and I thank you and Mikaela for that.

Samarra Khaja

