FAU book center hopes to revive art of handwriting

By Scott Travis, Sun Sentinel
8:26 p.m. EST, February 27, 2013

You might want to replace your tablet and smartphone with a pen and paper if you visit Florida Atlantic University on Friday. The university’s Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts is hoping to revive the art of letter writing through a new series of monthly events called “Real Mail Friday.” John Cutrone, curator for the Book Arts center, said he got the idea after receiving a handwritten letter in his home mailbox recently.

"It made me pause. I used to get a lot more of these," he said. "It struck me as a happy moment. When you get two or three handwritten pages of news, not just a card, it's like a little visit. It just seems different to me than when it's on your computer screen or a text message on your iPhone."

The event offers access to all kinds of retro tools needed to handcraft a letter, including hand-made paper, commercial paper, tipping pens, rubber stamps, postage stamps, envelopes and envelope sealing wax.

A 2012 survey commissioned by British printing company Docmail revealed the average person hadn’t written by hand for 41 days, relying instead on electronic devices. The decline in physical mail has prompted the U.S. Postal Service to announce it would soon stop delivering mail on Saturdays.

Handwriting has faced a fight for survival in Florida schools as well. State educators have debated in recent years whether to drop cursive writing from the curriculum. But handwriting still has value, according to a 2012 study by Laura Dinehart, an assistant education professor at Florida International University. She found students with good penmanship tended to get better grades.

While Dinehart hasn’t studied adults, she said there are advantages to writing by hand.

"You’re going to think about it a lot more,” she said Wednesday. "Oftentimes, when we write an angry email and send it, you notice the quality and tone didn’t come out as you intended. If you put it down on paper, you’re going to be much less likely to send something inappropriate because you’re thinking about it."

The first "Real Mail Friday" session was held Feb. 1 and generated a lot of excitement among the attendees, Cutrone said.

Pat Krause, a mixed-metal artist in Fort Lauderdale, used the high quality paper to craft a letter and Valentine’s Day card for her husband.

While Krause embraces digital technology, she enjoys the art of calligraphy, using quill pens with different colors of ink.

"I can’t imagine love letters being all email,” she said. "They just seem like they need to be personal and beautiful and something you put in a special box to keep."

stravis@tribune.com, 561-243-6637 or 954-425-1421

If you go
What: Real Mail Friday
When: Friday, 4 p.m.
Where: Wimberly Library at FAU, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton
Cost: $10 donation to cover supplies