Writing letters the retro way

Monthly FAU event revives old-fashioned charm of pen and paper in email age

By Jaci Fontaine
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Jennifer Islam of Delray Beach fell in love with letters a half-century ago. When she was in elementary school, international pen pal programs were popular. Educators believed having a pen pal improved literacy and handwriting skills, exposed kids to other cultures, and, in case the like Islam’s, connected friends for life.

"After 52 years, I’m still writing to my pen pal from fourth grade," Islam said. "We email now, she confesses."

But that’s the exception to the rule. Islam still devotes several hours each week to keeping up with her correspondences. On Fridays, you can find her at her local Barnes & Noble, sipping tea and writing letters.

But on the first Friday in March, Islam skipped Barnes & Noble and met the other letter writers at Florida Atlantic University for Real Mail Fridays, a program sponsored by the Jaffe Center for Book Arts.

The seed for the activity was planted last fall, when John Cutrone, the director of the Jaffe Center, found a surprise in his mailbox. Tucked in between the solicitations and bills was a rarity: A real letter.

"Brother Arnold," a hand-written note from Cutrone’s housemate on a Eames paper, had taken the time to write.

"I remembered how I felt and I wanted other people to feel that way too," Cutrone said. "It was about spreading the joy of mail."

When someone donated a bunch of beautiful stationary the Cutrones found a letter-writing social hour would be a lovely way to use the paper, a wist-win.

"I’m always trying to find ways to let people know about the center," Cutrone said. The center also provides envelopes and stamps, cookies, coffee and tea, a convivial atmosphere and an inviting setting. They even have seal wax and rubber stamps to make your letter truly one-of-a-kind.

Samantha Alpert, a sophomore at FAU, wanted to make an "old friend" of a "real connection" with an "old friend." "As I’m writing, my heart is happy," Alpert said.

Keeping the dying art alive

Writing

"Great thoughts become clearer," she said. "And I feel like I’m preserving an art form." Islam agrees. You do make a deeper connection. People tell you things in letters that they wouldn’t otherwise.

But letter writing is a dying art. Sending handwritten letters requires a certain discipline, and they have a charm that email can never have.

"You control the aesthetic," explains Judith Klaw of Delray Beach. You choose everything, from the paper, ink color, fountain pen or marker, and finally the words themselves. There is no right or wrong. Once the head of the English Department at the Groton School in Massachusetts, Klaw was writing to her grandson who is in basic training. He doesn’t have access to email so Klaw took pen in hand, but she probably would have anyway. "It’s more personal, it takes more thought," she said.

Maybe you don’t have anyone to write to. You’re not alone, Islam recommends the websites thedailystevesghan.com and The Letter Alliance (dailystevesghan.com), which keep the spirit of pen pal letters alive.

But one thing theArm has learned over the years is to guard against disappointment when the mailbox is empty.

"Don’t expect a letter in return," Islam says. "Hope for one."