Writing letters — the retro wayMonthly event at FAU revives the old-fashioned charm of pen and paper

By Jans Fontaine
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Jennifer Isham 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 cases like Isham’s, connected friends for life.

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

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

But on the first Friday in March, Isham skipped Barnes & Noble and met five 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 Shaker that Cutrone knew when he lived in Maine, 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 stationery to the center, Cutrone thought a letter-writing social hour would be a lovely way to use the paper. A web-wire.

"I’m always trying to find ways to let people know about the center," Cutrone said.

The center also provides pens, envelopes and stamps, cookies, coffee and tea, a convivial atmosphere and an inspiring setting. They even have sealing wax and rubber stamps to make your letter truly one-of-a-kind.

Samantha Apert, a sophmore at FAU, wanted to make "a human connection" with an old friend.

"As I’m writing, my thoughts become clearer," she said. "And I feel like I’m preserving an art form."

Isham 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 hand-written letters requires a certain discipline, and they have a charm that email can never have.

"You control the aesthetic," explains Judith Klaui 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, Klaui was writing to her grandmother who is in basic training. He doesn’t have access to email so Klaui took pen in hand, but she probably would have anyway. "It’s more personal, and takes more thought," she said.

Maybe you don’t have anyone to write to. You’re not alone. Isham recommends the web sites theletterexchange.com and The Letter Alliance (16sparrow.com), which keep the spirit of pen pal letters alive.

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

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

IF YOU GO
Real Mail Fridays
When: The first Friday of each month
Where: The Jaffe Center Book Art’s Book Studio 305C, Wimberly Library, FAU’s Boca Raton campus, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton.
Cost: $10 buys you access to all supplies, with complimentary stamps, cookies and coffee.
Info: 561-297-0226.