Boca Raton

Pencil in first Fridays for the dying art of letter-writing

By Ron Hayes

Hardly anybody sends them anymore. Almost everybody still loves them to get them.

We telephone. We email. We text.

Some even tweet.

But how many people send old-fashioned letters, written with a pen, sealed with a kiss?

"I got a letter in the mail one day and it was a revelation," says John Cutrone. "I stood at the mailbox thinking. 'Look, I got a real letter!'

A friend in Maine had actually taken the time to write. Imagine that.

Cutrone, director of the Arthur & Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts at Florida Atlantic University, was inspired. He would brew a pot of coffee, put out a plate of cookies, provide some nice pens and India ink, fancy paper, and invite the public to stop by and write.

"Real Mail Fridays" was born.

On the first Friday of each month between 4 and 6 p.m., a small but dedicated band of correspondents gathers on the fourth floor of the university's Wimberly Library to make someone near or far stand by a mailbox and exclaim, "Look, I got a real letter!"

"It's just about spreading the joy I got from receiving a simple letter," says Cutrone. "Plus we're going to save the post office."

He's joking, but the U.S. Postal Service isn't. It lost almost $16 billion last year. The nation's love affair with email is only a small factor in the downturn — mandated pension payments bear most of the blame — but the challenge is so great the postal service briefly flirted with an end to Saturday deliveries.

Every Forever stamp helps.

At the group's third meeting, on April 5, a woman named AnnaMaria Windisch-Hunt arrived from Lake Worth with a list of 20 names and addresses. Her bicycle had been stolen from her van recently, she explained, and these 20 Facebook friends had chipped in to get her a new one.

"I'm also a calligrapher," she said. "The mailman has been my best friend because I not only sent beautiful letters, I received them."

As the Cuban rhythms of the Buena Vista Social Club played softly in the background, Windisch-Hunt added ornate decorations to an envelope, the first of 20 thank-you notes to those friends.

At the next table, Diane Schwartz of Delray Beach sat intently filling a page with the lyrically cursive script kids don't seem to learn anymore.

"Dear Debra," she began — a birthday letter to her cousin in Boca Raton.

"Instead of buying one of those cards with a manufactured sentiment, I'm telling her why I love her," said Schwartz. "Letters are very dear to me."

"So dear, in fact, that Schwartz is the author of Girl Friend, a self-published, epistolary novel of World War II."

"When I was a kid in World War II," she said, "I met a Free French sailor whose ship had docked in New York. I saw that cute beret with the pompon...

They became friendly, and when he sailed for France, the sailor wrote her.

"Dear Debra ... I prefer much more the short evenings with you than the long Sundays without you..."

Schwartz is 87, but she still has, and treasures, that letter. It appears verbatim in her novel, with the names changed.

"The only people who write letters are people in their declining years," she lamented. "We were taught grammar, and how to write, and how to express ourselves. Nobody does that anymore."

Judith Klaw of Delray Beach sat beside her, composing a letter to her grandson, Pfc. Joshua Sandage, who is 21 years old and stationed at Fort Benning, Ga.

Is it true that young people don't send real mail anymore?

"To me he does," Klaw said. "He's written two wonderful letters to me, and I've written about 21 to him. At least."

Meanwhile, Cutrone, the director who started Real Mail Fridays, was satisfied with a small, undorned sheet of paper and black ink.

He was writing to FAU President Mary Jane Saunders, he said, just a simple note to thank her for her support.

He thought it might make her feel good, Cutrone said, to get a real letter.