



Preserving memories at the 'Crop Cupboard'

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clarkColleen Francis,

left, designer and

instructor, and Connie

Campbell, owner of the

Crop Cupboard, stand

by their sign at the

Northwood Shopping

Center location. The

Crop Cupboard

recently opened a

second store in 29

Palms, Calif.

There's a place in Jacksonville, a pink-lit room with wide open tables, where women can bring treasured photos and turn them into keepsakes. Rather than lay out scissors, die cut lettering, and stacks of old pictures on the dining room table, only to sweep them away at dinner time, scrapbookers meet up at the Crop Cupboard's event room.

Members of the store's Combat Croppers meet monthly in the event room for five hours at a time, telling stories about babies and deployments while they crop their pictures. Though the club is open to all, it's got special meaning for military spouses. Pictures remind them of what they've lost in the latest move or deployment; their shared love of memories gives them an immediate connection in a new town.

They are like women of another generation who gathered around personal scraps of material – pieces of a wedding dress or christening gown or faded overalls – and worked them into a quilt.

"Scrapbooking is the modern version of the quilting bee," said Colleen Francis, executive designer and instructor at the Crop Cupboard, which is located inside All Fired Up in the Northwood Shopping Center.

It was quilting that brought Connie Campbell to her business. Campbell been in Jacksonville for one day when she was invited to sell her work at All Fired Up, a boutique run by military spouses who sell their products on consignment.

Campbell began selling her quilts there; the shop's next-door neighbor was the Crop Cupboard. It was owned by another Marine wife, who was moving to Okinawa and looking to sell the business.

Campbell had a big decision to make, but had to consult her Marine husband long-distance: he was deployed to Al Asad, Iraq,

"My gut feeling was that I knew it was something I wanted to do, and it was feasible," said

Campbell, who liked the low overhead - and low risks - of sharing retail space. She signed the papers two weeks after her husband came home. He helped hang the slat wall in the shop.

In April 2005, she followed All Fired Up to its current location.

Campbell's background is in teaching, but she discovered scrapbooking a decade ago and fell in love with its blend of artistry and nostalgia. She was pregnant with her third son when she met Francis on their childrens' soccer field. Francis offered to help Campbell, nearly at her due date, with the craft fair on Camp Lejeune.

Francis had been scrapbooking for years, since before the birth of her twin sons and daughter.

"You can have the worst day with the kids, and go through your pictures, and remember how wonderful they are," said Francis. When her Marine husband deployed, the children would look at photographs of him for comfort.

Scrapbooks are an upgraded photo album, generally laid out on paper with all sorts of embellishments — ribbons, die cut lettering, and any variety of shapes and colors to set the mood for each page. At the Crop Cupboard, Campbell carries different product lines. She's designed her own line of scrapbook supplies, Combat Creations, including patterned paper and duty station die cuts that are all military-themed. The digital camouflage patterns are bestsellers.

She also launched the Combat Croppers club, and recently opened a shop in 29 Palms, Calif. with co-owner Roxanne Reed.

Francis flew out to open the shop, and to meet the 25 boxes of supplies they shipped over. Soon after, she had to deal with a family emergency.

"Connie asked if I needed a ride to the airport," Francis said. "Family's first, because in the military you never know when you'll see your spouse again."

Campbell would like to see a Combat Cropper Unit in every military town; she's well on her way with plans for another shop in Quantico, Va.

"It's empowering," Campbell said. "The concept excites me from beginning to end. It's our way of telling stories."

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