



Sarah Kurkowski and some of the soap she makes

Keeping her hands busy...and clean

“I like to do creative things that keep my mind busy,” Sarah Kurkowski says.

About a year ago, the South Suburban Merged, IL Branch 4016 member took up soapmaking in her spare time. “I kind of float from hobby to hobby and this one caught my eye,” she said.

Having always been crafty, Kurkowski enjoys crocheting, cross-stitching, quilt-making and 3-D printing. Her hobbies “depend on the weather,” she said, adding that quilting gets “a little warm.”

In the past, she had a small business producing Yeti-type tumblers, some of which were postal-themed. People loved them and wanted to order them, but as a result the pastime began to lose its luster for the 15-year letter carrier. “If I take my hobby to a business, it’s not fun anymore,” she said.

Soapmaking is something she can do year-round, and she values its practicality. “It keeps my hands busy,” she said. “Plus, it’s something you can use every day.”

The carrier began researching soapmaking, “mostly [by] watching other ‘soapers,’ and I read a lot,” she said.

Besides watching a lot of YouTube videos, Kurkowski also discovered the Soap Challenge Club on Facebook, where every month there’s a guest teacher who gives a tutorial on a

specific technique. There are different categories (like beginner and experienced), and participants can win prizes.

“It’s neat to see what other people around the world are doing,” the carrier said.

Kurkowski also learned that some organizations send soap scraps to other countries to help with sanitizing. “It’s a lot bigger world than I knew about until I started researching,” she said. “There’s a big demand.”

She decided to do her part, not by shipping items overseas, but by giving them to people in her corner of the world who could use soap. “I give it away to family, co-workers at the post office, and senior citizens that live in the senior buildings on my mail route,” she said, adding that her recipients “snarf it up like candy.”

There are two senior apartment buildings with a total of 75 residents on her route that Kurkowski brings soap for. “They love them,” she said. “The women said it makes their hands soft.”

Across the parking lot from there is a food pantry that has seen a big uptick in people using it amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. “They’re always looking for soap,” she said of the pantry. “That’s my next target.”

To produce her soap, the carrier first heats up some coconut and olive oils before adding a solution of lye and water, which turn the oils into soap

through a reaction called saponification. “There are no extra chemicals in it,” she noted.

Kurkowski next uses an immersion blender to mix it, then as it cools she adds any fragrance and colorants—mica powder tends to be the most vibrant for adding color, she said.

She then puts the mixture in a silicone loaf mold and lets it sit covered up. After 24 hours, she cuts it into slices. Although the soap is ready to use in 48 hours, she normally lets the soap sit for a month to cure, allowing the water to evaporate further so that it hardens and lasts longer.

“Each has its own design and smell,” she said, although some batches she purposely makes unscented for those she knows have allergies.

Kurkowski buys the oils from the grocery store. As she’s gotten more invested in the hobby, she’s learned about companies that make fragrances and she orders from them.

Some of her favorite scents are peppermint swirl (one of her most popular as well) and a lime-scented one that smells like a Jolly Rancher candy.

The carrier notes that she’s not really a floral person (“it’s a personal preference,” she said), and that she’s more interested in citrus fragrances and musky scents like sandalwood. Kurkowski had just received an order of an iced tea scent that she was

excited about using, and up next after that is butterbeer—"I'm really into Harry Potter," she said.

For the fall, Kurkowski has found a library/old books scent, which she plans to use to make pencil-shaped soaps for her daughter, who is a teacher. More complicated or creative designs do take longer—"if you have patience," Kurkowski says, adding that for her, it "depends on how the day at work goes."

Kurkowski, who works at the New Lenox Post Office, has one of the larger routes in her office, so she doesn't have a ton of spare time to dedicate, but she tries to make one to two loaves a week.

The carrier has multiple molds so that she can make soap two days in a row if she chooses; if one is in use while resting, she has another. One batch created in the loaf mold equals 10 bars, so she generally makes 10 to 20 bars per week.

She noted that she currently had about 50 bars that she was getting ready to package and drop off at the food pantry.

In addition, the carrier makes soap flakes, which she uses to clean her postal uniforms. This uses less soap than regular laundry detergent and, in her opinion, gets them much cleaner. She also estimates that she saves \$40 a

month by using her own soap. Making the flakes is "mostly a passion [just] for me," she said.

Kurkowski makes all of her soap at home in her large laundry room. "That's where my crafting stuff lives," she said.

She says she doesn't post about her soapmaking on social media, though she's more than happy to send a bar to someone who wants one.

"I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing, as long as people want it," Kurkowski said. "It lets out my creative process and gives me an outlet. I'm not looking to make any money from it. It's a labor of love." **PR**



Kurkowski's process for making her soap: mix the ingredients, pour it in a mold and let it harden before cutting it into slices and individually wrapping them.