



Manquilter: Matt Sparrow of Edmonton, the father of nine kids, isn't the kind of guy one would expect to be agonizing over thread colours

My wife didn't make that quilt. I did.

A growing number of men are taking up quilting, many of them retired engineers

AL HESLOP SPENT his life travelling to far-away places taking measurements from oil wells and then analyzing the data using the computer programs he wrote. As he watched the violence in Libya unfold on television, the retired petro-physicist from Airdrie, Alta., was able to spot a few of "his old stomping grounds." It was an adventurous career.

That's why it seems strange that the 76-year-old's new avocation involves carefully matching his fabrics to his threads and then meticulously piecing them together with needles and a Singer. Al Heslop is a proud quilter. And no, it was not his wife's idea.

It was the other way around. Heslop dragged his spouse to the quilt shop to pick out their very first patterns, one day about five years ago. When he got home and opened up that first set of instructions he realized he'd chosen an advanced quilt by mistake. But the pattern that might have taken an advanced hobbyist months to finish was ready to hang two weeks later—just in time for him to enter it at the county fair where his daughter lives, in Kennewick, Wash.

As he stood proudly with his work, a pair of women came up to examine his quilt. "Look at how she did that stitching," gasped one. Heslop corrected her. "She didn't do that," he said. "I did!" The woman gasped again. He won first prize and the local guild changed its name from the Material Girls to the Prairie Quilt Mercantile.

Matt Sparrow, the owner of Sparrow Studioz in Edmonton, isn't the kind of guy one would

expect to be agonizing over thread colours either. For the photo on his blog, *Manquilter.com*, he struck the type of badass pose one might see on a pro skateboarder's site, and he's not averse to using swear words. He says that whenever people hear he's a quilter, their first reaction is to imply that he's gay. "But whatever," says Sparrow. "I've got nine kids."

Heslop and Sparrow are part of a growing crowd, says Vivian Kapusta, secretary of the Canadian Quilters' Association. Sparrow's online forum has reached 185 male members (including some from as far away as Germany) since he started it two years ago. Kapusta has also noticed that a large percentage of male quilters are retired engineers. The former high school principal from Maple Ridge, B.C., has a theory about that. She had always wondered why boys seemed attracted to the geometrical wall-hangings in her office, unlike girls. Then she realized they were fascinated by the geometry.

Heslop sees the math connection too. "It does involve some trigonometry," he says. "Like in this Star of Bethlehem quilt I did, you sew six strips of fabric together in the colours you want and you cut them in 45 degrees and they all end up in diamonds. Then you sew the sets of diamonds together to get the stars," he says. "It's really quite intriguing."

Other men are drawn to quilting by the

complex long-arm quilting machines they get to use, says Sparrow. "My daughters' friends' fathers come over and they're right down on their knees looking at how it all works," he says. "Men see it as pretty much just a big power tool."

Before quilting, Sparrow was a website developer. But within weeks of purchasing his own long-arm, he quit his Web job because he had so many requests from female quilters to help them finish the stitching on their pieces. His romance with the craft started one day when his wife was struggling to stitch together a multi-layered quilt. "I wasn't confident she was doing it the right way, so I looked it up on the Internet," he says. "She wasn't."

The complex long-arm quilting machine is a big draw. 'Men see it as pretty much just a big power tool.'

He wasn't afraid to tell her. That's one of the biggest differences between male and female quilters, according to Sparrow. "Women will look at each other's projects and tell them how fabulous it is, even when it's not," he

says. "But I've noticed that men can take one look at something you've been working on for years and they'll tell you the truth right away."

Heslop certainly doesn't hide his true feelings about the quilts he saw at the Calgary Stampede last summer. And considering he plans to compete, female quilters better be prepared. "I imagine I'll be in the prize money," he says. **JOSH DEHAAS**