

The spirit of giving

Bits n Pieces Quilt Guild turns fabric scraps into works of art that bring comfort and joy

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Laborers of love. That's the best way to describe the 438 quilts made by members of the Bits n Pieces Quilt Guild for its Cover our Kids and More program.

The quilts are donated to a host of area organizations including West County Care Center in Winchester and Mercy Children's Hospital.

"The quilts were a huge hit," said Alberta Lee, manager of Mercy's Child Life department, who helped to distribute this year's quilts on Dec. 12.

She said the kids love the quilts, but it's the parents who realize the work that goes into them.

"One mom said, 'To think that someone who doesn't even know my child spent so much love and time into making something for them is awesome.'"

"Sometimes it's as simple as that," explained Nancy K. Peters, who is a past guild president and longtime member of Cover our Kids. "You say, 'my child is healthy, so I'll gladly make a quilt for a child who is not.'"

"It's really not fair," said Lee. "The ladies put in all the work, but they don't get to see the excitement on the kids' faces or the gratefulness of the moms. I get to see all of that."

"One of the quilts had all of the superheroes on it. That one went to a little boy who, when he saw it said, 'Superheroes!' I said, 'Yes, superheroes. Bundle up in it and it will make you brave.'"

"The quilts are all different and unusual. The key to making them special is finding something that clicks with that individual child," Peters said.

The program, Peters said, grew out of a former guild member's personal experience. Her children had hemophilia and required treatment at a local children's hospital. While there she noticed that the treatment left many of the children physically cold. She suggested to friends in the guild that perhaps they could make quilts for the kids. From that humble beginning Cover our Kids grew, eventually adding the "and More" when guild members began creating quilts for older recipients including returning servicemen and women.

Along the way the importance of the quilts shifted.

Susan Calzone, Cover our Kids and More chair, explained.

"I don't think it's always about physical warmth," she said. "Sometimes it's about emotional warmth."

All members can tell a story or two about thank-you notes they have received or stories they've been told about the importance of the quilts they so freely give away.

Calzone reports that one woman at West County Care Center was so pleased to receive her quilt not because she wanted it for herself, but because it meant she had a gift to give to her newest great-grandchild when the infant was brought in to visit.

"You don't have to be sick to need a quilt," Calzone pointed out.

The quilts that go to Epworth in Webster

needed before the piece can be quilted.

"This is a team effort," Calzone said. "Some quilts are made entirely by a single member, many more have two or three members involved in their production or even have a small group working on many quilts. About half of the quilts are produced by Cover our Kids members, the rest come from individual guild members."

Either way, quilts do not come cheap. The guild provides Cover our Kids with an annual donation that mostly is used for buying batting and backing, Calzone said.



From left: Bernice Dodge, Susan Calzone and Nancy Peters with some of the quilts made by Bits n Pieces.

Groves serve more as tangible reminders that someone cares.

In fact, it takes a lot of tender-loving care to create each one-of-a-kind quilt.

"It's a multifaceted process," Calzone explained.

Not every guild member takes part in the Cover our Kids program – and not every member of the program creates whole quilts. Some members make blocks. Some package the blocks into quilt tops. Others sew the tops together. They may or may not add the batting and backing that are

Much of the fabric for tops, along with thread and incidentals comes from the generosity of guild members and others.

"There's not many people you meet, even in church, who are as giving as quilters," said Bernice Dodge, who was a former chair of Cover our Kids. "There's just something about the personality of a quilter. They're willing to share."

"And people donate fabric to us," Calzone said.

"And we scour the sales looking for bargains," Peters added.

Still, each quilt represents an investment of \$30-\$50, plus hours and hours of sewing, ironing and creativity.

"That's the best part," Peters said. "We enjoy playing with fabric. We enjoy being creative and putting things together in interesting ways."

Having an outlet for their finished works means that the quilters can branch out beyond what they might make for family and friends.

"Maybe you find some fabric that would make a wonderful quilt for a child, but you don't have a child to quilt for. Now you do," Peters said. "And when you come to a guild meeting and hear a thank-you card or a really great story, you just want to go home and make another one."

Calzone said that friendships and fellowship also play a role.

"Some of it (quilt making) are things you do alone at home, but we also come together and have sew days," she said. "Members bring their sewing machines and irons and we sew together as a group for about six hours."

She describes a day of sewing, snacking, talking and laughing.

"It's just fun," Dodge said.

Although the group meets on the fourth Tuesday of each month (except December) at Salem United Methodist Church in Ballwin, its 2013 sew days took place at St. John Lutheran Church in Ellisville and at West County EMS and Fire Protection District's station house on Henry Road.

"Our guild has grown exponentially since its founding on Jan. 1, 1984," Calzone said.

She noted that Cover our Kids has been in existence for at least 20 years and also has grown exponentially.

"When we first started we had just 60 members and made about 30 quilts a year," she said.

One of the ways the guild acquires members and support is through the quilt show it holds at Queeny Park in even-numbered years. Fanfare of Quilts, the guild's 2014 show, will be held March 15-16. Revenue collected from admission to the show helps to run the guild for the next two years and afterward the guild sees an influx of new members.

"We had about 1,500 people come to the show last year," Calzone said. "We always get new members and then we can make more quilts for Cover our Kids."

"The guild as a whole is the team and the goal is to produce quilts that will provide comfort, joy, distraction, entertainment, a feeling of worth, of not being forgotten to another being."