

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH - QUILTERS

“The repetitive manual work is prayer.” Amen. These prayers have been sent up for years by the quilters at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Monroe, CT. The GSLC quilting group has members of all ages who meet in the church hall every other Saturday morning to cut, piece, tie, and sew. Together, led by Ellie, the group has created and sent hundreds of quilts out into the world. The handmade blankets are a practical, tangible response to need, offered without judgement.

The group was founded eleven years ago when GSLC’s pastor at the time, Bryan Leone, suggested it to longtime church member and quilter Ellie. Pastor Leone invited Reverend Rafaela Morales Rosa from St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Bridgeport, CT to meet with anyone who was interested, as she was an accomplished quilter with such a ministry at her church. Ellie mustered a small group at first and created five quilts in that year. In the early days, the quilts were finished by hand which was very time consuming. Ellie says “the energy of these ladies is wonderful. Many say ‘I’d love to help but I don’t know how to sew.’ It doesn’t matter. There is something for everyone to do. And you can leave early, come late, or stay for the whole thing.”

This winter the quilting group lost a founding quilter when GSLC member Sam Barate passed away at age 102 in February. But spring, as it does, brought new hope and energy as the quilters planned to honor Sam’s memory by creating 102 quilts—their greatest annual output—to include in their yearly shipment to Lutheran World Relief.

Quilter Donna tells us “I’ve been quilting for 5 years. I like the Zen of quilt tying – 83 knots per quilt, 48 middles and 35 intersections. But really, it is the community that keeps me coming back. We discuss the world both near and far twice a month. Sam told us many stories of what Connecticut was like in the past 100 years.”

The quilters do not always know in advance who will receive their gift. Says Eileen, “As I’m quilting, it gives me pleasure to speculate who might be receiving this particular one, and to pray that this gift will bring warmth and comfort to someone in need.” Barbara adds “Lutheran World Relief sends a truck to our area where church member Dave takes the boxed quilts to meet the truck in Hamden, CT. Lutheran World Relief takes them to Baltimore where they store them until there is a disaster, then they send quilts for aid. Our quilts may go to people in the U.S. or anywhere in the world for aid and comfort or to refugees to carry their belongings.” Later, long after the shipment, Nina, church secretary, learns from LWR where the quilts were sent. Prior destinations include the Philippines, Mali, India, Ukraine, and Ethiopia.

A special connection was made in the aftermath of the November 2018 shooting at the Borderline Bar & Grill and the California wildfires. Quilter Karen, who has personal ties to Thousand Oaks and California Lutheran University, “received word that the university was requesting comfort quilts for the many students and faculty that were directly impacted by the

shooting (it was college night at the Borderline) or the loss of homes due to the fire (or both!). The GSLC quilters immediately agreed to respond by making 4 quilts in school colors (purple and gold). Thinking that there may be others in Thousand Oaks beyond the CLU community that might benefit from the unique kind of comfort and support that our extended Sandy Hook community can offer in our shared grief, I called Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and extended an offer for quilts. A week later we were given the names of 4 people who lost loved ones in the shooting and the quilts shown below were quickly sent out with personal notes for each of them.

With more catastrophic fires raging close to my niece's home near Paradise, CA, our quilters also sent comfort quilts to Faith Lutheran church in Chico which was providing temporary shelter and care for the members of Paradise Lutheran Church. Quite a whirlwind of outreach in a short period of time but very satisfying and empowering to be able to respond to such need in time of trauma and grief."

The quilters' ability to respond so powerfully to need comes from their teamwork. Says Donna, "We are a well-oiled machine: Miriam and Karen iron the fabric; Eileen cuts the fabric (and figures out what will match), Kathy and Miriam lay out the quilts, there is a cadre of volunteers who sew the tops; Saturday volunteers put together backs; Ellie and Barbara put together the quilt sandwich and prep it for tying; the tiers tie; Ellie trims the quilt and Nina finishes it. We can find work for any and every one!"

Even children who have no experience sewing can help. Church member Alison says "my daughter's Junior Girl Scout Troop joined the GSLC quilters to learn more about their group and the steps it takes to complete a quilt. All 8 girls in the troop participated, and they saw firsthand the entire quilt-making process: laying out squares for a pattern, ironing, sewing, laying the quilt on top of batten, tying knots, etc. Each girl rotated through a different station and they all made small pillows that they were able to bring home, much to their delight. Some of the girls are even talking about buying sewing machines of their own! The quilters were endlessly patient and good-humored, and the girls had a wonderful experience and were so impressed by the sheer volume of quilts the ladies produce."

The quilters rely on donations of money, fabric, batten and supplies to produce their handiwork. In a cost-savings that would please Maria von Trapp, the group even repurposed old church lounge drapes into a quilt! To defray costs, the group holds an annual raffle. As pictured below, the group lays out the year's work in the sanctuary to be admired by all and blessed by Pastor Doug Ryniewicz. After a few Sundays of ticket sales, at close of service a fortunate winner picks his or her favorite quilt to take home. (Closer readers will note that means the quilters actually produced 103 quilts this year; one to give away and 102 to send off to those in need.)

This year the winner, Deb, a longtime GSLC member, picked a yellow floral quilt with navy blue and white polka dot accents, pictured below. The day before the quilt raffle, the congregation

was saddened to learn of the passing of a fellow quilter. After an illness, quilter Kathy passed away. Ellie tells us “Kathy was the lead of the ‘Designing Women,’ as she enjoyed layout and packaging up the squares to go in the ‘to be sewn box.’ She had been a member for quite a while.” Before the quilts were sent off, Kathy’s family was invited to pick a quilt to keep in her memory. As blue was her favorite color, her family picked a blue quilt and a photo was taken with all the quilters around an empty chair with that special quilt draped across it.

In closing, Barbara tells us, “I enjoy the quilting group because there is such a need for the quilts, because I enjoy the camaraderie of the other women, and because it has helped me improve my sewing skills. It is very creative work and friendships grow as we work together.” Working together. Amen.

