

Quilters make blankets to comfort soldiers, families



Truth Photo By Jennifer Shephard A portion of a quilt face sits in a pile waiting to be stiched together.179771 Jennifer Shephard

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by: Truth Staff

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By Kelli Yoder

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ELKHART -- A 20-year-old soldier named Aaron came back from Iraq and arrived at the burn center of Madigan Army Hospital in Washington state. He'd lost an eye and an arm and more than 50 percent of his body was burned.

Sue Nebeker of Vashon Island, Wash., got a call from the center asking for one of her American Heroes Quilts for Aaron. She grabbed the only one on hand -- out of a box sent from Elkhart.

Aaron's wife was with him. She told Nebeker that she met her husband in a foster home in Indiana during high school and that this quilt might be the nicest thing they owned.

Aaron didn't want to take the quilt at first and then was afraid to use it. Overwhelmed by the experience, Nebeker went home and e-mailed the story to Jody Jones, her contact in Elkhart.

"I told him that if it somehow got 'messed up' we would make sure he had another," she wrote. "He said there would never be another one like this and started to cry."

Aaron's story sealed the commitment the Elkhart quilters have made to Nebeker's organization, American Hero Quilts. Jones read the e-mail and copied it for her friends in the Heartland Quilters Guild.

"I just at that point said, OK, I'm going to stick in this and do whatever I can do until it's over," Jones said.

"There's a lot more Aarons out there and how else can we show them that we care?" asked guild member Tammy Gardner. "That's the only thing I know to do."

American Hero Quilts

It was another heart-breaking story that moved Nebeker to begin American Hero Quilts. She read about a 23-year-old soldier who came back so affected by what he'd seen that he committed suicide.

"I felt then that I wanted to do something in the hopes that maybe we would make a difference for someone hurt and who might need a metaphoric hug," Nebeker said.

Through American Hero Quilts, all wounded soldiers coming into Madigan Army Hospital -- one of a few specific places injured soldiers are sent -- receive a quilt with a label on the back that reads: "You are our hero. Thank you!"

While there are other organizations that give quilts to soldiers, AHQ is unique in that no one has to apply or be judged worthy of a quilt.

Every wounded soldier coming into Madigan, as well as the new Warrior Transition Battalion in North Carolina, is given a quilt.

So far, since the organization began four years ago, 3,216 quilts have been handmade and given to wounded soldiers at the Madigan and the WTB; 1,276 more have gone to wounded soldiers at other locations across the country; and 1,076 have been sent to Balad Airbase in Iraq.

In addition to wounded soldiers, AHQ has started giving quilts to children who have lost a parent in the war. Those quilts have labels that read: "Child of a hero."

Another branch of the service gives quilts to families that have lost soldiers after their return -- to suicide. 313 of these quilts have been delivered. Their labels read: "In loving memory of (soldier's name) in honor of their services and sacrifices for our country."

That might be the saddest number of all for Nebeker.

Heartland Quilters

The women of the Heartland Quilters' Guild in Elkhart got involved when word of AHQ's needs spread to member Jody Jones via an online quilting forum.

Jones mentioned the organization's call for help to the guild, not counting on any sort of commitment.

"Well, they took the ball and ran with it," Jones said. "I mean, scored a home run."

Jones is a Century 21 agent struggling to make a full-time living. But there is one benefit to having uncertain work hours.

"It allows me to join the group, which I couldn't do if I had a 9-to-5," Jones said.

After the initial call for help, Jones sent the box that arrived just in time to help Aaron. The women of the group found his story compelling.

"I think that's what made everybody in the guild feel like they needed to continue," said, Gardner of Edwardsburg, Mich.

Gardner is an important piece of the helping puzzle because she can long-arm quilt, which means she has the capability to take a finished quilt top and stitch it together with its batting and backing.

She recently committed to doing this with all the quilt tops made in Elkhart for AHQ. It saves Nebeker from having to ship the tops elsewhere to get them finished. But it also costs a bit more for the group in Elkhart to ship the heavier quilts.

For this reason, the group is asking for donations to help cover those charges. The donations would be tax-deductible. And they're glad to accept fabric, batting or thread as well.

All avid quilter and guild member Gerry Geyer needs is fabric. She's responsible for nearly half of the 50 or so finished quilt tops sent by the guild so far.

She recently held up her latest tops for Jones and Gardner. All are made up of the required red, white and blue fabric combinations but each is very different from the last. Some of the prints have words like "peace," "freedom" and "liberty." One has the pledge of allegiance at its center.

"She is like the Energizer Bunny," Jones said of Geyer while examining a panel with blue and white stars around it.

The women believe in this project partly because they can each speak for the power a quilt can hold. Gardner's 12-year-old daughter brings quilts and blankets with her wherever she goes.

"I guess she's being wrapped in love everywhere she goes," Gardner said.

"When you spend that much time creating something that you give to somebody else, part of you goes with it," Jones said.

Geyer said it's a way to physically help.

"Where, as mothers and grandmothers, we can't be there helping them," she said as tears filled her eyes.

Nebeker appreciates each and every one of the men and women helping with American Hero Quilts.

"Without Heartland Quilters we can't continue to hug our wounded and bring them comfort," Nebeker said.

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