

Wrapped in Love

Heartwarmers work with scissors and smiles, hands and hearts.

Sometimes all it takes is a gentle nudge, and if you're paying attention, that little push will lead you to the right opportunity to use all your very best talents in a meaningful endeavor.

The nudge that motivated Mary Tomjack of Bend was a Christmas gift in 2012 of a fleece blanket from a 45-year friend in Atlanta, Georgia. Her friend's church group was making them for a homeless shelter and that got Mary thinking. After looking up a YouTube video on how to make the cut-and-tie (no sewing involved) blanket, she made her first nine and the rest, as they say, is history.

"The name 'Heartwarmers' came to me in the night ... I kept

thinking, this is so heartwarming and the blankets are warm and from the heart ... [I] went to sleep and woke up thinking of the answer," Tomjack explained.

"Mary brought her idea of a new charity to our Bible study group and asked if any of us would be interested in making fleece blankets for adults and children in crisis," recalled Heartwarmers founding member Jeanette Chamberlain, who now serves as secretary for the organization. And, of course, they said yes.

The growth of Heartwarmers has been by attraction, both for volunteers and for agencies served. When Tomjack told a woman from KIDS Center, who happened to be sitting across

the table at dinner one evening, about the blankets (and, oh by the way, she had some in her car), the response was immediate.

"We'll take all we can get," came the first request for the blankets, and three years later KIDS Center has received 569 blankets for children who are dealing with abuse issues.

That first request was in the spring of 2013, and with the addition of a group of women in Sisters soon after, by July of that year 500 blankets had been made and donated, mainly to KIDS Center, St. Charles Cancer Center, and Saving Grace.

In those first months, the women purchased their own fleece and washed it prior to

making the blankets. Now the fleece is all purchased with donated funds to the nonprofit and Tomjack launders it all before the blankets are constructed.

Every time someone sees one of the blankets or hears one of the heartwarming stories of a recipient, new recruits come on board to join their hands with others to continue this true labor of love. Wherever they gather, curious bystanders are attracted by the buzz of friendly conversation and the brightly colored fleece.

There are 12 active volunteers in Redmond who meet at the Redmond Senior Center, 41 who meet at Sisters City Hall, and 39 in Bend who meet on



the Rosie Bareis campus. Fifty-one additional people have been involved at some point over the past three years.

"After visiting the Sisters' group a few times and recently attending a session at the fast-growing Redmond group, I realized that each town has very devoted people who truly love Heartwarmers and what they are doing," said Chamberlain.

volunteer working at home, hand ties and returns the blankets.

Another team began making fleece hats that have become part of the gift bundle. Jane Krause of Plain Jane Hats coordinates volunteers who cut, sew, and accessorize the hats with decorative buttons and pins, or flowers made from fleece scraps. Fleece hats for children are also being made, with 18 donated at

donated to Meals on Wheels and Partners in Care.

Babies' receiving blankets are edged and donated to the neonatal intensive care units (NICU) at St. Charles Bend and Emmanuel Hospital in Portland. Infant hats knitted and donated by other volunteers are given with each of these little blankets.

Volunteers are also knitting scarves and hats for infants,

Tomjack remarked.

When the spirit moves them or a special request is made, volunteers will take on one-time projects such as making brightly colored tutus for little girls to play in at MountainStar Family Relief Nursery.

When they were asked to make examination gowns for KIDS Center, they purchased fabric and volunteers sewed it into child-sized



"Home for some of these children is a tent, a car or a temporary place. Having something that was made just for them, means more to them than many of us can really comprehend. The smiles and excitement tell the story."

— John Smallwood of Jericho Road in Redmond.

Tomjack's favorite response to inquiries has become the group's motto.

"Just bring your scissors and a smile." And her aside is always, "I have scissors."

The individual blankets were only the beginning. As part of the larger organization, an amazing team of volunteers works together to make and donate adult blankets and accessories for cancer patients. Anita Kutella has organized and distributed these blankets to St. Charles and Bend Memorial Clinic cancer treatment centers for the past three years. She and Martha McGinnis, both of Bend, also personally donate socks, bandanas, and lotions to package with the blankets. After the blankets are cut at a workshop, Connie Souther, a

Christmastime to Fostering Hope to be given to area foster children.

Creative uses have been found for every single scrap of fleece, giving rise to the nonprofit's No Waste Policy. A sister team, Rosie and Esther, make soft blocks from the leftovers, and they are donated to a number of agencies serving children.

Kim Sonder of Redmond makes "Message from the Heart" pillows for the children's bereavement groups at Partners in Care hospice, and to go with the adult blankets donated to St. Charles infusion center in Redmond. Sonder also shows the volunteers how to crochet around the edges of a single layer fleece blanket. Many volunteers from each workshop are edging and donating lap robes for adults, which are being

children, and adults, for which they purchase their own yarn. Circle of Friends in Sisters gave knitted hats and scarves to all their mentored children at Thanksgiving. Knitted hats have also been donated to The LOFT in Bend, housing homeless teens, and Redmond Senior Center.

So that not one scrap goes to waste, volunteer Molly braids and knots the selvage edges, that are cut from the fleece, into fun dog and cat toys that she distributes to Bend Spay and Neuter, BrightSide Animal Center in Redmond, and Furry Friends Foundation in Sisters.

"As you can see, Heartwarmers has evolved into a community of generous volunteers bringing other skills and donations ... to use in our outreach. They are the amazing hearts and hands of Heartwarmers,"

gowns. The leftover fabric was cut into squares and Sam, a Sisters volunteer, sewed them into a quilt, which was presented along with the exam gowns.

The biggest addition to the program has been the knitted teddy bears created by a gentleman in Redmond, who for a long time remained anonymous. They accompany the children's blankets (see story on next page).

Praise for all of Heartwarmers' efforts on behalf of the community comes easily and often from those who work in the recipient agencies.

"Home for some of these children is a tent, a car or a temporary place (such as a motel room for a night or two). Having something that was made just for them, means more to them than many



of us can really comprehend. The smiles and excitement tell the story," recounted John Smallwood of Jericho Road in Redmond.

Each of the groups within the nonprofit has become their own little family unit, offering friendship and support to one another as they create comfort for those in need.

"The ladies were so friendly and so willing to get me started on a project. I now can do blankets and hats at home in the evening, knowing they are going to be needed somewhere," explained Bend group member Maxine Mohrholz. "Mary (Tomjack) is so good – telling us where the items go and showing pictures of little ones receiving their blanket and bear. It makes you feel so good. It fills a gap doing something for the community."

A number of volunteers acknowledge that they receive as

much as they give.

"I just knew this would be a wonderful way to help others in crisis," said Bobbie McNeil of Bend. "It is comforting to us, too, to be working with this soft material. It is like an old fashioned sewing bee ... we can all work on the blankets together and talk while doing so. I have met new friends and enjoy seeing these ladies twice a month. Heartwarmers is positive and loving and it also warms my heart."

The greatest motivation of all, of course, comes from the recipients. Last fall, the Bend group had the pleasure of meeting LilyAna, her physical therapist, and her mother, Crystal, at Treehouse Therapies, which is located on the Rosie Bareis campus where Heartwarmers also meets. LilyAna had spotted the bright blankets and bears and

was delighted when allowed to choose her new friend, planting a tender kiss on his nose – a special moment for LilyAna and the Heartwarmers.

The blankets and other gifts created by the Heartwarmers will continue to cover the vulnerable among us, as reflected in this year's goal shared by Tomjack.

"We will continue as we are and seek to gift more nonprofits."

Long term, the hope is to establish new Heartwarmer groups in surrounding Central Oregon communities, to meet requests they are receiving. They have never done any formal fundraising and say they never

will. So far, the willing generosity of those who hear their story and see the value of their mission has provided needed funds. Donated funds are used to buy fabric, purchase insurance, and limited office supplies.

They are hoping to secure donated space centrally located between Sisters, Bend, and Redmond, in which to store all their materials and finished projects. For the past three years, Tomjack's garage has looked more like a fabric store/toy store, and the cars have been relegated to the driveway.

Perhaps someone will feel a little nudge and respond.



BY THE NUMBERS

DONATIONS IN 2015:

764 blankets

364 bears

133 knit hats

225 lotion & socks, bandanas

228 fleece hats

110 fleece and knit scarves

130 small blankets/lap robes/capes/ponchos

DONATIONS IN THE PAST 3 YEARS:

2,319 blankets

784 bears

234 knit hats

440 lotion & socks, bandanas

228 fleece hats

110 fleece and knit scarves

142 small blankets/lap robes/capes/ponchos

13 tutus

MEETING PLACES AND TIMES:

Bend – 2nd and 4th Thursday of the month, Rosie Bareis Center, 9:30 a.m.

Sisters – 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month, Sisters City Hall, 1:00 p.m.

Redmond – 2nd and 4th Fridays of the month, Redmond Senior Center, 1:00 p.m.

WEBSITE:

www.heartwarmersco.org

FACEBOOK PAGE:

HEARTWARMERS

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HEARTWARMING BEARS

by Susan Stafford, for *The Bulletin Special Projects*
Photos by Kevin Prieto



Just like one of Santa's elves, John Nelson of Redmond spends four hours a day, most days, making very special teddy bears for very special children.

Nelson's bears, made on a circular knitting loom, accompany all the children's fleece blankets made by Heartwarmers. He learned of their mission from his mother, Joyce Miles, one of the original Bend members.

The knitting loom had been a birthday gift for Miles, but she had never picked up on it. Instead, Nelson, a long-time weaver, gave it a try and, 2 ½ years later, he has knitted almost 800 bears, each one taking about four hours.

Nelson chuckled as he recalled that head Heartwarmer Mary Tomjack originally told Miles they would like to have about 30 bears and he thought that would be it.

The bears are a joint effort. Nelson knits the separate pieces (head, body, two arms, two legs), stuffs them, and drops them off at his mom's house. Miles, who is a great-grandmother, sews the pieces together, attaches a heart on each bear, and adds colorful ribbons around their necks, a process that takes about an hour for each bear.

She gives the finished bears to Tomjack, who distributes them to all three of the nonprofit's groups to be bundled with the blankets.

In the beginning, Nelson kept his identity a secret, until one day at the end of last year.

"A tall, quiet man with kind blue eyes walked in the door of the Redmond workshop and said, 'Are you Mary?' and then introduced himself as 'John Nelson — who makes the bears,'" Tomjack recalled. He has been



Lilyana smiles happily as she accepts her colorful bears

attending the workshops regularly ever since.

Nelson's bears catch everyone's attention with their little black eyes and colorful yarn bodies. Some are knitted to look like they are wearing sweaters, with stripes or contrasting colors.

Nelson enjoys seeing photos of children receiving his bears.

"Children are always delighted with the soft snuggly teddy bears and blankets. They bring a smile to their day," said Jeanna Darnell, MountainStar Family Relief Nursery program director.

Though Nelson enjoys making the special bears and spending regular time at the Heartwarmers workshops, he is hoping to recruit some volunteers who would like to help him make the bears.

"I have lots of other things to do," said the retired postal service facilities specialist.

Nelson, who has always enjoyed working with his hands doing wood and metal work as well as building dollhouses and miniature furniture, is ready to begin a new hobby using his embroidery machine. He and his wife, Jan, also have a new family member, a Bernese Mountain puppy.

While Nelson is ready to explore new hobbies, the impact he has made with his bears is profound and the hope is for that tradition to continue as he passes the passion on to new bear makers.

"It gives me a good feeling to know that the bears are going to children in need," he said.