

# Quilts blanket at-risk children with love

## Spirit Mountain Community Fund donates to grassroots group

**Editor's note:** This is the eighth in a monthly series of stories in 2008 by *Smoke Signals* that showcase the real-life effects of Spirit Mountain Community Fund donations. Since its inception in 1997, the Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, has donated more than \$40 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories focus on the good work those generous Tribal dollars do within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

By Ron Karten

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

As many as 35 to 40 quilt makers in Corvallis dedicate most of every Wednesday to the nonprofit Quilts from Caring Hands, a group that makes quilts for at-risk children in their local area – Willamette Valley in western Oregon.

They make crib-sized quilts and twin-sized quilts. They make what they call "tactile" quilts for vision-impaired children. The tactile quilts offer a variety of different fabrics – from corduroy to fleece to satin and lace – and bright colors that are easier to distinguish for the almost blind.

Each square feels different. The differences encourage children to investigate further. They provide children with a chance to sensitize their hands and fingers, and that later helps with learning Braille.

"Touch is going to be a sense they're going to use," said June Nielsen, a Corvallis mother and homemaker who started the group in 1990 with four volunteers and a lot of high hopes.

"It was totally on faith," Nielsen said. "I had no money, just an idea. The basic philosophy is to make as many quilts as we can with the supplies and the willing hands that come to us."

And not all of the volunteers had experience with quilts when they started.

"I thought it was something I'd enjoy doing," said Dottie Miller, who has been with the group almost from the beginning. "I took pieces of fabric home and took a year to make (my first) quilt and bring it back."

Likewise for Pat Thomson, formerly a research assistant at Oregon State University.

"I wasn't a quilter," Thomson said, but the work gave her "a lot of satisfaction."

"It's not a job," she said. "It's just a pleasure."

The cause is irresistible, the quilters say, and they add that the community of quilters is a great added benefit.

"I like the idea of making quilts for children at risk," said Helen Quale, who has been with the group almost since the beginning. Long before joining the group, she was making quilts for her children and grandchildren.

"It's the companionship and doing something worthwhile for kids," said Miller.

"If you make one child happy," said Betty Hill, "it's all worth it. And the people here are wonderful."

The group raises money through donations and grants for what has become a \$10,000 annual budget. Spirit Mountain Community Fund this year made its first contribution — \$4,535 — to the group.

Though this is a relatively small donation for the Community Fund,



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Quilts from Caring Hands volunteer June Nielsen works on tying a quilt, along with other members of the group including Sue Ellis, left, on Wednesday, Aug. 6, in Corvallis. The group makes quilts and donates them to organizations that help at-risk children. Spirit Mountain Community Fund contributed \$4,535 to the group this year.

Community Fund Administrative Assistant Kluane Baer said, "These little, tiny grassroots organizations deserve some recognition."

"It takes a lot of time and dedication to complete a quilt, but to turn around and give that labor to a child that doesn't have anything, I think that's awesome."

With Oregon State University and a community college nearby, many volunteer quilters have backgrounds in higher education, and most participate in other volunteer projects in their retirement days.

For Jan Lowther, formerly with Linn-Benton Community College in the Graphic Arts Department, Quilts from Caring Hands is one of her many volunteer efforts. She also traveled to El Salvador with Stove Team International, a group providing safe indoor cooking stoves.

Even within the group, the volunteers fill many functions. Board members — treasurer, purchaser and secretary — put in more time than their Wednesday quilting efforts, Nielsen said.

"And nearly every woman in the group does something at home that contributes to our mission, such as sew on bindings, piece a quilt top, launder donated fabric, cut up scraps," Nielsen said.

There's a quality control group that checks finished quilts for needles or safety pins left in the fabric, and loose knots.

The camaraderie among the group is noteworthy even in the jokes. "When we tie our knots," said Quale, "we wonder if the knot police would find it lacking."

Although no men currently are quilting, the Web page comes courtesy of Jeff Jimmerson, a local Web specialist. John Smith, husband of volunteer Vickie Smith, goes over the group's financial books as his contribution. And Terry Tallis, whose wife, Jan, also volunteers with the group, helped with the group's brochure.

Thirty-five to 45 women show up each week to participate in the quilting, and more than 60 are currently members.

Recipients of the quilts are nonprofits dealing with many aspects of childhood difficulty. Quilts from Caring Hands currently donates to 14 agencies, including the Center Against Rape and Domestic Violence, Parent Enhancement Program, Vina Moses, a Corvallis nonprofit helping low-income families, and the Trillium Children's Farm Home.

With five different cottages for children needing orphan-type services, the quilts have many uses, said Cheri Galvin, Regional Development director of Trillium Children's Farm House.

"If a child comes here with nothing, we provide a quilt at the start. Others get to choose one as they leave to go to their home communities," Galvin said. "One boy picked out one with rainbows because, he said, his sister loved rainbows."

For a girl who was leaving and going to miss the nonprofit's therapeutic horse program, she chose a quilt that had horses on it.

"We get fabrics from attics," said Quale. "We got a package from an Army wife in Italy. We also got a package from a girl in Texas with a note that said, 'Tell Helen Quale hello.' It turned out she went to school with my daughter."

"I've been addicted to fabric and quilting since 1976 when we were making quilts for the bicentennial," said newcomer Virginia Gregory, who moved to Corvallis six months ago from Illinois. "People kept telling me about the group."

Carolyn Brumley has been quilting for the group since 2004. She had just retired from the Chemistry Department at Oregon State when one friend brought her to a Wednesday meeting, and another friend sent her a bunch of fabric.

Some things are just destined to be. ■

## Survey performed before proposal was developed

TRANSIT GRANT  
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proposal now includes reprioritizing Federal Transit Administration funds already awarded the Tribe last year.

A survey of Spirit Mountain Casino employees was performed this summer before the proposal was developed. The proposed service plan will have nine round trips a day six days a week to Salem. From Salem, transit riders can take existing bus service routes to Dallas.

In 2007, the Tribe worked with the Yamhill County Transit Area to extend its McMinville to Willamina bus service out to Grand Ronde. That service (seven round trips a day, Monday through Friday) is being subsidized by State Special

Transportation Fund monies and FTA Tribal Transit funds.

Ridership has continued to grow each month since the service was created in December. The proposed Salem service will not affect funding for this Willamina route, which is provided by Yamhill Community Action Partnership through Yamhill County Transit Area.

The current YCTA West Valley route, as well as the proposed Salem commuter route, can serve elderly and disabled riders with available wheelchair lifts.

"This is a tremendous opportunity as a partnership," said Salem-Keizer Transit Transportation Development Director Stephen Dickey at the July 30 Tribal Council meeting. "It's an historic moment of government-to-government relationship." ■