

Tompkins Weekly

Memorial Quilt Stitched with Affection

By Sue Henninger

Saoirse McClory has had a lot of experience with death. As the Director of Community Support for Hospicare & Palliative Care Services of Tompkins County, McClory believes that loss doesn't have to be completely negative. She has seen many instances when those who knew and were positively impacted by the deceased are drawn together to create something special in honor of their loved one.

McClory finds this "connectedness of the community" to be heartening and uplifting. She says she's "grateful to be witness to these stories of kindness between humans," when people demonstrate a commitment to connectedness and caring.

To McClory, being able to physically join together and work on a project, while reminiscing about the recently departed, can provide both a healing aspect and a piece of closure for those feeling a tremendous



"The quilt isn't just about my mom but about all of the people that surrounded her as well," says Erin Canfield.

sense of loss.

When Elma Canfield died, friends, family, students and fellow sewers and quilters knew exactly what to do. "Elma Canfield inspired

us all to be the best sewers, and individuals, we could be," writes her good friend Brenda Carpenter, Extension Communicator for 4-H Youth Development.

Over the years Canfield, a master sewing leader, taught many people, both young and old, to sew through the 4-H sewing Program. From the time she was nine years old, Kerry O'Connor took sewing classes with Canfield, sampling everything she offered, because Canfield was "very patient and very good at teaching you things so you understood why you were learning them."

One of Canfield's trademark projects was teaching those who participated in her classes how to make "crazy quilt" pillow tops. When she died, Carpenter wrote that making a large quilt in her memory out of these pillow tops was a natural choice for her friends and former students. O'Connor explains that while traditional quilts have specific measurements, the crazy quilts are made from leftover materials in a pattern that can't be recreated, so it "represents the person you are when you're making it" through the choice of colors and piece shapes.

The memorial project was a group effort by many volunteers. Retired 4-H educator JoAnne Baldini, who worked with Canfield on many sewing programs with youth, assembled and added the edging fabric for the quilt and Boynton Middle School's former

family and consumer skills teacher, Marci Wyant, who collaborated with Canfield on trainings, summer sewing camps and the sewing club over the years, was in charge of the machine quilting.

O'Connor's job was to find the right colors for the borders and to design the layout for the fabric squares, while Lori Benjamin, a nurse who cared for Canfield at the end of her life, offered to make the final adjustments on the quilt so it could be hung in a particular spot in Hospicare.

Daughter Erin Canfield says, "The quilt isn't just about my mom but about all of the people that surrounded her as well." To her the quilt is a visual symbol of someone who positively impacted kids' lives by giving freely of her time and her skills.

"It's funny how many stories came out of the quilt and helped pull it all together," Eric says. "There's a bit of every person she touched in it. We knew she was special but the quilt shows how much she meant to a lot of people in the community."

In December the quilt was hung at the Nina K. Miller Hospicare Center. To Erin Canfield, it is a wonderful memorial to her mother and a great way to honor the

Hospicare staff who did so much for Elma at the end of her life. Erin, who lives in Rhode Island, went to see the quilt at Hospicare over the Christmas holiday and notes, "It's gorgeous!"

Though the quilt doesn't indicate which parts were contributed by her mother, Erin and her father recognized Elma's favorite squares of material in a number of places.

McClory says that, for those who don't sew or quilt, there are a host of other options for groups to choose from, including planting a tree or a garden, building a bench or a pavilion or making something symbolic to give to a not-for-profit in memory of the deceased. All are gestures that can be both generous and healing to those who have lost someone important to them, she says.

Copyright ©2010 Tompkins Weekly

This article appeared in print edition of Tompkins Weekly January 18-24, 2010. Reprinted with permission from Tompkins Weekly. www.tompkinsweekly.com