

Coffee Creek Quilters: A stitch in time saves lives

BY NANCY HILL

Behind chain-linked fences topped with treacherous swirls of dense razor wire, women serving time at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility piece patches of donated fabric into beautiful quilts for sick children, terminally ill patients, homeless shelters, Katrina relief, and other charitable organizations. As their sewing machines hum the salvaged scraps of fabric into place, the women's own lives begin to take shape again.

Jennifer Nielsen, 34, takes time from the coveted two hours a week she has to work on her quilt to talk about this program, named Coffee Creek Quilters (CCQ).

"I never imagined I could make a quilt. I have ADHD, so it's always been hard for me to stick to things. I also have hand tremors, so sewing isn't easy. When I first started, it'd take me the entire two hours of class just to thread the sewing machine. I'd get so frustrated, I wanted to throw the bobbin and give up. But somehow I knew that this program was the way to start getting things right."

Jennifer acknowledges she hadn't gotten much right in her life before being sentenced to Coffee Creek. While she makes no excuses for her choices, her early life set the stage for failure. Her father sexually abused her. Her mother, a firm believer in a strict religion that expected women to be submissive, insisted Jennifer quit school at 16 to help out at home. As soon as she turned 18, Jennifer took off to California, where she made ends meet however she could, including working as an exotic dancer.

After a series of bad choices, she returned home. Her drinking escalated, and she became increasingly rebellious. It seemed nothing she did turned out right, including her marriage, which was volatile and dangerous. After plea-bargaining an arson charge down to five years of probation, she was charged with driving under the influence. Her probation was revoked and she was sent to the minimum-security unit at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville to serve the remainder of her probation time.

"This was the best thing that ever happened to me," she

says, her huge blue eyes full of pride. "Making quilts has shown me that I can do whatever I set my mind to do."

With a laugh, she says she had to learn some tough lessons about prison before she signed up for CCQ. "I came to prison planning to continue being rebellious. I didn't follow rules. I was disruptive and disrespectful to staff. I got sent to maximum security. Two weeks of that and I realized I'd better straighten up. I got into a business program. I noticed a lot of girls going into the cafeteria every week to make quilts and heard them talking about how much they were learning and how much they liked the women teaching them. I saw how proud they were of the quilts, and I saw some of the quilts

hanging up in the cafeteria. I wanted to be part of that."

The fact that Jennifer had no experience sewing didn't deter her. "That might even have been one of the main reasons I joined," she says, sweeping her long dark hair back. "I needed to prove to myself that I could learn something new, something that would be hard for me. And I wanted to show myself I could finish something for once."

CCQ began in 2002 when a woman named

Koko Sutton heard

a presentation about the prison's philosophy of tough love and helping women work toward a better life when they reenter society. Finding like-minded people, she secured sewing machines, fabric, other tools, and a place to store

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~ Jennifer Nielsen



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the fabric. The program was successful from the beginning and continues to grow. Since its inception, between 500-600 women incarcerated in Coffee Creek have learned how to make quilts, and the quilters, who range in age from 20-60, have donated upwards of 1,500 quilts to charities.

The annual budget is \$12,000, with the cost an average of \$100 a year per participant. Each woman in the program makes three quilts, two of which she donates to charity. The third quilt she makes for herself. Many of the women give their third quilt to a relative. Each participant receives her own sewing machine after she has made her final quilt. Supplies are kept locked up in cabinets in the cafeteria, where classes are held. Each woman stores the supplies for the quilt she is making in a pizza box held inside the cabinet except during class. Tools are closely monitored; every pin is counted.

Jennifer is now on her third quilt. "I'm using bright, batik fabric because I like lots of color. The first two quilts I made went to children. I did one with puppies that I was really proud of. It was awfully cute."

The list of things Jennifer appreciates about the program is lengthy. As a CCQ participant, she has acquired new, useful skills. She has learned patience. She has proven to herself she can accomplish very difficult tasks despite having ADHD and hand tremors. For the first time, she has seen that she can finish something she starts. She has come to appreciate the



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~ Volunteer, Mary Ann McCammon

camaraderie of other women working together. "It's a lot like the quilting circles you see in movies," she says.

But most of all, she appreciates the volunteers. "They don't treat us like we're criminals. They are caring and kind and encourage us every step of the way. We learn by how respectfully they interact with each other how to do the same with other people. The girls in the program are all respectful of each other, which makes us a really strong, healthy group. We talk about all kinds of things while we're making our quilts."

Mary Ann McCammon has been a volunteer for seven years and enjoys the experience immensely. A nursing professor at OHSU who had worked with marginalized women throughout her career, she thought CCQ would be a good fit.

"As soon as I visited the program, I knew I would enjoy it. Every week I experience heart-warming moments that validates why

we're here," Mary Ann says. "Last week a student started crying because she sewed her first seam using a sewing machine and never thought she could do something like that. She'd never sewn before."

"Several weeks ago a student brought in a picture of her son holding the third quilt she'd made. It was a New York Yankee quilt because her son loves the Yankees. She told him whenever he felt sad or sick to put the quilt around him and it'd be like having his mommy's arms around him."

In addition to teaching, Mary Ann writes grants. "Teaching in the program helps with the grant writing because I know all about the program."

Coffee Creek Quilters has four groups that meet every week for two hours. There are 20 women and five volunteers in each group. Typically, the inmates participate between 12-24 months. Volunteers stay for years. CCQ supplies the sewing machine, fabric, and tools to make the quilts. Fabric comes entirely from donations. Funding comes from grants, donations from individuals, and creative endeavors such as selling donated sewing machines on eBay. The program is strictly a volunteer organization.

Week after week, Coffee Creek Quilters helps the women serving time in Coffee Creek to take pieces of fabric to make quilts and, in the process, to stitch their lives back together. In doing so, the women give back to the community and better themselves.

As Jennifer's two-hour-session wraps up, she checks out the small batik square she has made. Pleased, she grins, folds the square carefully, and puts it in her pizza box. She has decided to keep her third quilt for herself.

"This is personal," she says earnestly. "I'm keeping it as a reminder of what I can accomplish when I don't give up on myself. It means a lot to me."

To read more about Coffee Creek Quilters, go to www.coffeecreekquilters.org. You can also email the non-profit organization at <mailto:CCQ2@comcast.net>.