



Photos courtesy of Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital

Members of the leadership team at Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital, Ashland, Ky., where a prayer shawl ministry has comforted patients for the past two years.

PRAYER SHAWLS: A BLESSING IN EVERY STITCH

BY MARGOT PATTERSON

Recently discharged from the hospital, Kay Hammond of Louisa, Ky., still spoke with a weak voice. It grew animated, however, when she talked about the prayer shawl she had received two weeks earlier. “It’s just beautiful,” she said. “It’s green with different colors. It was made just for me.”

A lung infection put Hammond, 49, into Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital in Ashland, Ky. She remained there for 30 days and two bouts of intensive-care treatment. Hammond had just been moved out of the intensive care unit for the second time when Christi McKinney, a nurse manager, walked into her

room to tell her about prayer shawls. Hammond had been chosen to receive one.

“I was suffering from a lot of pain,” Hammond recalled. She struggled to put into words what the gift meant to her. “When I was presented with the prayer shawl, it was like maybe God

was pleased with me,” Hammond said, finally. “Like maybe I’d made a difference to somebody else.”

Prayer shawls are soft scarves or mantles made of crocheted, knitted, quilted or woven fabric. The shawl maker begins with prayers and blessings for the recipient and maintains that intention while creating the shawl. When it is complete, the shawl gets a final blessing — and then it is given away.

Hammond said the prayer shawl “meant an awful lot to me” because of her faith. “I think [a prayer shawl] is a

wonderful idea,” she said firmly. “God tells us to pray without ceasing, and that’s what we are to do for our brothers and sisters because we never know when they need a prayer.”

For more than two years, Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital has been distributing prayer shawls to patients in need of a little extra loving care, men and women alike. The hospital established a ministry that draws on the knitting and crocheting skills of about 20 volunteers. Occasionally, the makers of the shawls know who will receive their handiwork; more often, they don’t. As they knit, crochet, stitch or weave, they pray for the health and well-being of the recipient.

“It’s a blessing on both ends, both the receivers and the people who make the shawls,” says Nancy Browning, 67, who immediately knew she wanted to participate when she learned the hospital was starting a prayer shawl ministry.

“I thought it would be an outlet for me to pass on what I could make. You

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—NANCY BROWNING

can only give your grandkids so many scarves and hats,” said Browning, who learned to crochet when she was 4 and has been knitting since she was 24. But, she added, the appeal was more than just the opportunity to practice her crafts. Intrinsic to the ministry is praying for the individual who will receive the shawl.

“You just pray that God will use that prayer shawl to make them feel at ease and calm about the situation,” Browning said. “I’ve heard two or three stories about how in people’s dark hours, they just cling to that. It blesses them

to know that someone prays for them.”

Thus far, Browning has made 89 shawls in almost every color of the rainbow. She said she keeps yarn on hand all the time. “Sometimes I can do three prayer shawls in a week if I don’t have many outside activities going on. I have several different patterns, and there’s so much variation in the yarn that it’s never boring. It’s always fresh and new.”

Sandra Daniel, director of clinical nursing education at Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital, said the shawl ministry has proved very successful. “I receive calls every day from staff requesting shawls for patients with special needs,” she said.

It was Daniel, in conjunction with Jennifer Moore, senior vice-president for patient care services at Bellefonte, who started the hospital’s prayer shawl ministry. Daniel’s father taught her to crochet when she was 12, and she has been crocheting ever since. A few years ago, she found a Lion Brand yarn

www.shawlministry.com

The website for the prayer shawl ministry begun by Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo (www.shawlministry.com) offers information about patterns, prayers, workshops and retreats; forming a prayer shawl group; the symbolism of numbers and colors; and includes a photo gallery.

A section called “Stories and Inspirations” recounts different individuals’ experiences with prayer shawls. A few of the stories are very brief, as in a reference to 98-year-old Maria D’Antuono of Tempera, Italy. She lived through the 2009 L’Aquila earthquake and was trapped more than 30 hours under her bed. “She was determined to stay alive” and spent her time “doing crochet,” the entry reads. Most are longer, personal stories — frequently,

but now always, of pain and loss. Some are written by people who received a shawl and felt so moved by the gift that they wanted to make a shawl for someone else.

Jane Parsley, of Frederick, Md., received a shawl on the death of her son Andy and has since made shawls for others. “I have found a purpose in knitting in the ‘bleeps’ that are found in yarn. I leave those ‘flaws’ in place and knit them right into the garment, then I point them out to the recipient and remind him/her that those ‘bumps’ are a reminder to us of our lives,” she wrote.

Yosrah Johnson, a student at Northern Illinois University, wrote of being in a lecture hall in 2008 when a man with a gun walked in and opened fire, killing five students and injuring dozens more.

Johnson escaped with minimal injuries but felt profoundly shaken. In a “peace room” the university opened after the shooting for students to use to reflect and pray, Johnson found crocheted prayer shawls one day. “I read the note and prayer that came with the shawls and tears came to my eyes,” Johnson wrote. “This act of genuine kindness touched my heart and made me realize that love and kindness still exists in our world even when we feel like it is not out there.”

These and other stories remind readers that small acts of kindness make up the fabric of life along with loss, joy and suffering. Those who have given and received prayer shawls know that sympathy can be healing.

pattern with information and instructions for a prayer shawl, and she began making them for family members and friends in need.

In December 2007, Daniel was crocheting one on the plane home from a conference when Moore, who was seated next to her, asked what she was making. Then Moore asked if Daniel thought they could bring prayer shawls to Bellefonte. Two years and 200 shawls later, the program is popular and picking up steam.

“We have never encountered a patient who did not want the shawl. Of course, we do ask them ahead of time. We tell them about the ministry and ask if we can give them one. It has always been accepted with open arms,” Daniel said.

The caregivers at the bedside are the ones who decide which patients should get a shawl, Daniel said. “It’s one of those things that you just know,” she said, telling of a woman, grieving over the death of a grandson, who had received a shawl just that day. “She was very appreciative and she stopped crying, and it did seem to bring some comfort to her.”

The Bellefonte shawls are blessed in the hospital chapel and made with extra-soft yarn, one reason why prayer

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shawls are sometimes called “comfort shawls,” “peace shawls” or “mantles.” “It’s the softness that brings the comfort,” Daniel said. With the shawl, re-



Alesia Baker, social work (left to right), Sandra Daniel, director of clinical nursing education and Jane George, palliative care nurse.

ipients get a card that tells them about the history and significance of prayer shawls.

The ministry at Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital is one of many places where prayer shawls have caught on. The effort was pioneered by two women, Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo, both graduates of the 1997 Women’s Leadership Institute at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn. Bristow and Galo studied under Prof. Miriam Therese Winter and developed the

ministry as an outgrowth of their work in applied feminist spirituality. The shawls are intended to be given away unconditionally, never sold. They are meant for people in need of comfort and solace and for occasions of celebration and joy as well. They can be used for the ill and suffering, for the grieving, for people in crisis or undergoing a medical procedure, for prayer and meditation, for birthdays, anniversaries, ordinations and graduations, for anyone, in fact, who can be touched by encouragement and prayer.

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