SHARING THE COMFORT OF QUILTS

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By Janet Goetze

It's like an old-fashioned quilting bee, with fabrics of all colors spilling over the tables as women measure, cut and make fine stitches while visiting back and forth.

This gathering has a twist, however, because most of the 20 women working around the tables with five mentors had no idea they could make something so beautiful.

Then feel joy in giving it away.

The women are inmates in a volunteer-run quilting program that began at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in April 2002 with two volunteers and 12 -inmates. They worked around six sewing machines in the minimum-security dining hall.

Less than two years later, the program has grown to 15 volunteers and 60 inmates in three classes. The waiting list stretches to more than 100.

"The only room available is the cafeteria, which has only five electrical plugs," said KoKo Sutton, the Wilsonville resident who organized the quilting program. "So we have some logistical problems."

Whatever those problems are, however, the students appreciate the instructors' dedication to a two-hour session each week.

"I enjoy bonding with the ladies who come here," Nanci Walker, 33, of Portland said of the volunteers. "And I enjoy seeing the finished quilts. . . . And you know they're going somewhere to help people."

The first two quilts made by each inmate go to children's hospitals or nursing homes. Each woman may keep her third quilt, constructed with donated materials, but many inmates elect to give it away, too, to a child, a parent or another family member.

Sheila Staggs, 36, of Independence, who has learned to weld as well as quilt during her 17 months at Coffee Creek, plans to give her third quilt to her sister, who recently lost her 24-year-old daughter.

"I want to do something nice for her," Staggs said.

Learning to quilt provides the students with skills they can use after they get out of prison, said Sutton, who proposed the class to Coffee Creek officials after she saw a television show about a quilting program in a California prison.

She created a nonprofit corporation, the Coffee Creek Quilters, to receive donations and grants for fabric, thread and other supplies.

"We teach some color theory and offer an outlet for creativity," said Sutton, 72, who began quilting after she retired from her office job. "But they also are learning how to resolve problems and create something out of nothing. They are learning the logic of procedure and how to work together to accomplish something."

The women in the quilting program are in the minimum-security section of the prison, where they serve the final three years or less of their sentences, typically for such crimes as assault, robbery or identity theft.

Nearly 80 percent of the inmates' offenses are drug-related, said Norma Land, public information officer at Coffee Creek.

Despite their crimes, many women arrive at Coffee Creek with little confidence in themselves because of past physical, emotional or sexual abuse, Sutton said.

Some have poor hand-and-eye coordination, she said, which is needed for a variety of tasks, including threading a needle, operating machinery and reading.

"It may take us a while, but they catch on," Sutton said. "They learn how to maneuver the fabric so it goes through the machine straight."

The program has been very successful, Land said, in part because the volunteers find ways to assist the women who encounter difficulties with quilting tasks.

Land participated in a pre-release interview with an inmate who described herself as "having an attitude" that was turned around by the quilting program, the information officer said.

"It was because the volunteers were willing to keep working with her and not give up on her," Land said.

The social support the women receive in the class, with advanced students helping newcomers, also is a new experience for many of the inmates, Sutton said.

She is encouraging women who complete their sentences to find quilting groups in their home communities, she said.

"It could increase their skills and provide them with some needed social support," she said.

The emotional bonds developed in a quilting group can be as important for the volunteers as they are for the inmates, said Miki Grove of Portland, who usually drives to the prison one night a week to work with four students. Recently, however, Grove has come two nights a week to help George Alice Ferguson finish her third quilt before her scheduled release in less than three weeks.

The holiday break in classes, followed by the week of snow, separated teachers and students longer than usual, Grove said.

"You should have seen this place the week after the snows," she said. "We were just starved for each other and starved for quilts."

Ferguson, 59, of Portland, who has updated her computer skills and learned to repair washers and dryers at Coffee Creek, said learning to quilt has been a bonus skill for her.

"I feel like I'm accomplishing something," she said. "It's really not as hard as I thought it would be . . . I'm really enjoying this."