

LATEST NEWS

Project Linus sews homemade blankets for infants in need at Fort Worth hospital

Volunteers piece together sense of security for newborns in intensive care

07:21 AM CDT on Tuesday, April 1, 2008

By LILIANA VARGAS-LEMONS [Al Día lvargas-lemons@aldiatx.com](mailto:lvargas-lemons@aldiatx.com)

FORT WORTH – Debbie Umphress carefully cut out the small rectangular pieces of cloth and arranged them on a table in a meeting room at John Peter Smith Hospital.

As she laid out the multi-colored pieces of fabric, about 10 volunteers formed an assembly line and began making blankets for "in crisis" babies in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit.

The volunteers for the nonprofit Project Linus arrived at the hospital about 8:30 a.m. Friday with sewing machines, fabric and other completed blankets in hand – now an annual ritual for the Tarrant and Parker counties chapter, said Judy Bell, coordinator for the group.

By afternoon, they had sewn nearly 50 blankets and handed the hospital nearly 10 times that many – all handmade.

"We actually met a girl coming in who had a blanket draped over her baby's carrier," said Ms. Bell. "She was coming back for a checkup, and she had one of our blankets. The lady who made it and I were just standing there with tears in our eyes."

Project Linus, which has 19 chapters in Texas, including chapters for Collin, Dallas and Denton counties, started in 1995 in Colorado when Karen Loucks donated handmade blankets for children battling cancer at Denver's Rocky Mountain Children's Cancer Center. Ms. Loucks got the idea after seeing an article in *Parade* magazine about a child going through chemotherapy who talked about how her security blanket had helped her.



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Elaine Sexton, a volunteer for 10 years with the group, worked on a quilt of her own. After Friday's efforts combined with the group's previous work, Project Linus handed the hospital nearly 500 homemade blankets.

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Added Ms. Umphress: "It feels good to do this, and at the same we get to have a lot of fun."

The name of the project is taken from the Peanuts cartoon strip character Linus, known for dragging his security blanket everywhere he went. More than 400 Project Linus groups now exist across the country.

"The blankets and quilts that they bring to JPS are beautiful," said Yvonne Kyle, director of volunteer services for the hospital.

Ms. Kyle added that the blankets donated by Project Linus go fast because of the high numbers of babies born at JPS. About 6,000 babies are born at the hospital every year, hospital officials said, and 80 percent of them are Hispanic.

"I feel very blessed; that is why I like doing this for these babies," said Ms. Bell, who's been active in the group for 10 years.

"The blankets and quilts are like a hug for children who are in crisis," Ms. Bell said. "It gives them security. We have given blankets and quilts to fire departments, organizations that help children with AIDS, and we gave some to the students from the Columbine shooting."

The group started with about five volunteers, Ms. Bell said, but has grown to more than 80 and has donated more than 16,000 blankets.

"All of our materials are donated, including some of our sewing machines," Ms. Bell said.

When the donated fabric is too coarse to be used for children's blankets, she said, it is donated to groups that make blankets for the homeless or other groups.

By the numbers

2,293,340: Number of blankets donated nationwide

406: Total chapters

19: Chapters in Texas

For more information: Call 309-664-7814.

For information on how to volunteer at JPS, call 817-927-1590.

SOURCES: Project Linus and *Dallas Morning News* research

Staff writer Ana Barrera contributed to this report.