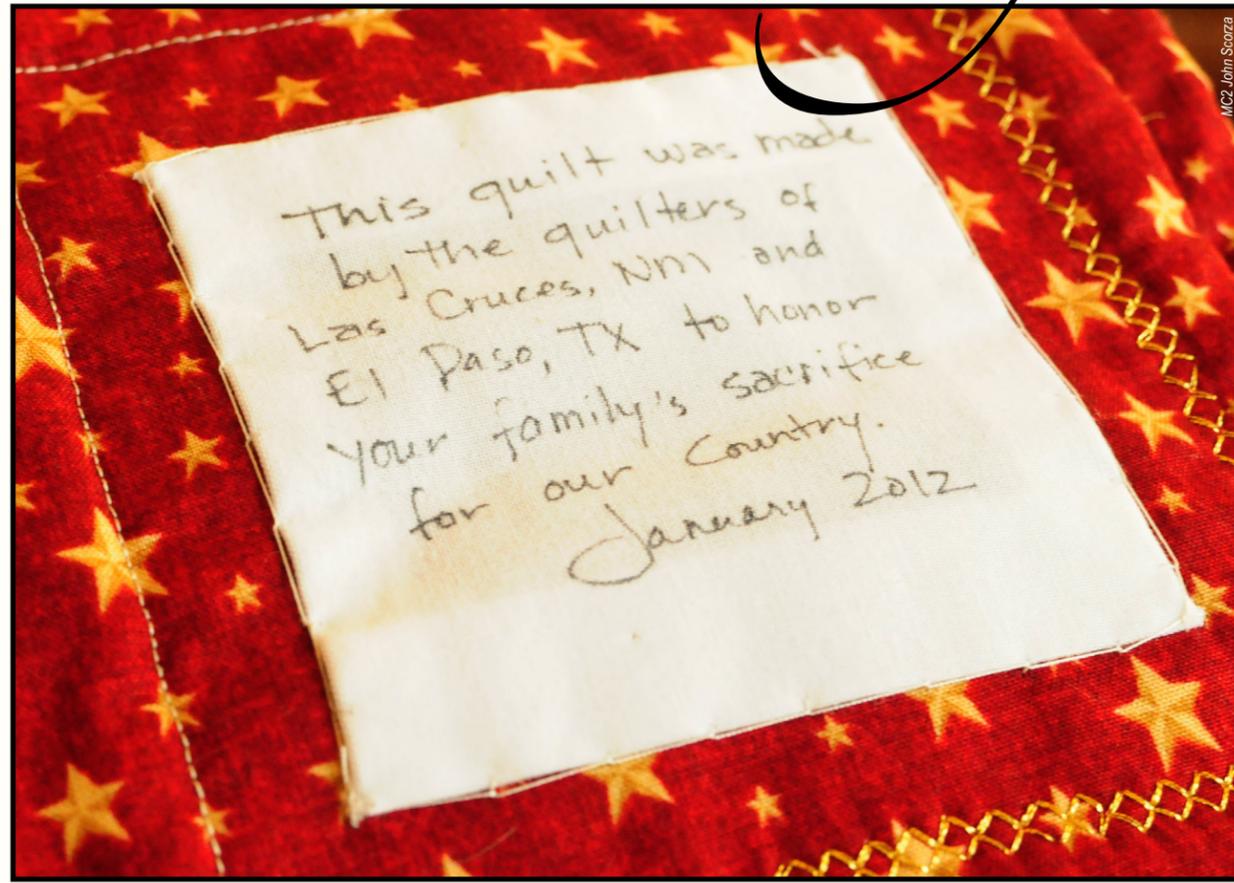




Quilting

for the families of the fallen



There is a piece of quilting wisdom that says, "Our lives are like quilts - bits and pieces, joy and sorrow, stitched with love." Throughout the history of America, quilts have been used for warmth on a cold night; they add beauty and value as a home decoration, provide clues to the past and are also used to remember a loved one.

On Aug. 6, 2011, Naval Special Warfare suffered a devastating loss when 22 of its elite operators were among 30 Americans who died when their helicopter, code name Extortion 17, was shot down in Afghanistan - the most deadly incident for U.S. forces in the decade-long war.

Since that fateful day, many individuals and organizations have stepped forward to extend a helping hand. Some have donated money to the families or to charitable organizations dedicated to helping service members and their families. Others have sent cards, letters and care packages. Although all forms of benevolence are deeply appreciated, most gifts are temporary and can never fill the void of a lost husband, father or son. However, a group of women from Las Cruces, N.M., is giving NSW families a gift they can hug, hold on to and comfortably sleep under for generations to come.

In September of 2008, two dedicated moms started a Blue Star Mothers of America Chapter in the up and coming city of Las Cruces. Located 225 miles south of Albuquerque and 42 miles west of El Paso, Texas, Las Cruces has a population of 95,000 and boasts a Blue Star chapter 25 mothers strong. This may not sound like a staggering number, but if you consider that the neighboring city of El Paso has a population of over two million and doesn't host a Blue Star Mothers club, 25 proves to be an impressive number.

A Blue Star Mother is quite simply, a mother with at least one son or daughter honorably serving in the military. The organization is dedicated to supporting active duty personnel, promoting patriotism and helping the country remain strong. It began in the early 40's and was chartered by Congress in June of 1960. Since that time, members have shown pride in their children's service by hanging blue stars on their homes and car windows. The organization was dormant for many years, but reemerged in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Cynthia Clark and Kelly Fitterer, co-founders of the Blue Star Mother's of Las Cruces, are also members of Dona Ana Moms (DAM), a quilting group made up of many of the local Blue Star moms.

For years, Cynthia and DAM have lifted the spirits of many by presenting their heartfelt masterpiece quilts to New Mexico Gold Star Mothers - mothers who lost a child who died in a combat zone while serving in the military. They have also donated quilts to both comfort and honor many servicemen and women across the country.

"I think the biggest thing that we've done is reach out to other moms

and families that have wounded warriors," said Cynthia. "When we first started sending them quilts, it seemed so minor in comparison to everything they've done and been through. We know, from the feedback we've gotten, that it touched them and it's something we want to keep doing."

After the Extortion 17 helicopter crash, President Obama extended his thoughts and prayers to the families of those who perished.

"Their deaths are a reminder of the extraordinary sacrifices made by the men and women of our military and their families, including all who have served in Afghanistan."

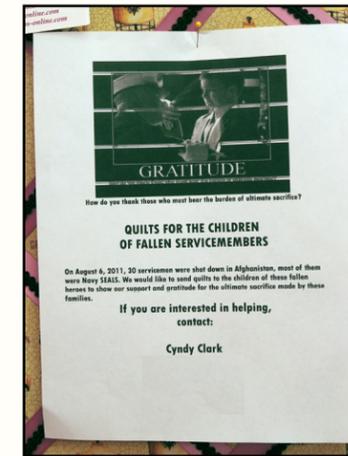
As the Nation reeled from the devastating loss of 30 American heroes, Cynthia knew she wanted to do something special for their families. The group decided to make a quilt for every mother, wife and child of NSW's fallen - 64 grieving family members.

To a non-quilter, crafting 64 hand-crafted covers may not sound like a daunting task, taking into consideration time and money, the group may as well have considered climbing Mt. Everest.

It takes a professional quilter like Cynthia 30 hours to construct a single basic quilt, with a minimum cost of \$200. Of the eight quilters of DAM's membership, only two are experienced and for many of the group, the NSW project would be their first quilt. For an inexperienced quilter, making one quilt could take up to 60 hours to complete. A quick crunching of numbers reveals that honoring NSW's fallen would cost New Mexico's charitable quilting team more than \$13,000 and take more than 3,800 hours to complete. This computation doesn't take into account the many hours of fundraising activities essential for purchasing quilting materials and covering shipping costs.

Realizing the task at hand would require hard work and dedication, the Dona Ana Moms remained focused and motivated knowing their handmade quilts would serve as personal, communal, aesthetic and functional gifts honoring brave men who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

"A quilt often times has the reflection of your personality," said Debbie Persinger, a Blue Star Mother and quilter. "It's also something that no one else can do but you. Nobody else has worked on that quilt



Marsha Cowan, owner of Bernina Sewing and Design, sews a quilt in her store located in Las Cruces, N.M. The flyer above, made by Cynthia Clark, was hung in Marsh's store for the local hobbyists to view and led to the donation of several quilts helping the DAM quilting group reach its goal of 64 quilts.



but you, so you are giving a little piece of yourself. In these days, making something handmade is almost unheard of."

Realizing the magnitude of the task, Cynthia reached out to the Las Cruces community. Her first visit was to Marsha Cowan, owner of Bernina Sewing and Design. Marsha not only allowed Cynthia to post a flyer in her store, but also donated 10 quilts she made.

"When Cynthia told me of the project, I really started thinking about the wives, children and mothers trying to cope with the loss; I knew I had to help out," said Marsha. "I just can't imagine having to deal with such a loss."

Cynthia also reached out to the Las Cruces Quilt Guild at one of its scheduled meetings, appealing to membership for donated quilts.

"Right after the meeting, two of the older ladies came up to me and showed me two quilts that were just gorgeous and said, 'I just have to give you these,'" said Cynthia.

Quilts were also donated from Mission Lutheran Church in Las Cruces and the Las Colcheras Quilt Guild in El Paso.

"This project took all of Las Cruces and some of El Paso," Kelly joked.

After working for months to produce what she thought was enough quilts for 64 family members, Cynthia and the group met and started matching the quilts with each family.

"We had quilts piled up all over the place," said Cynthia. "I finally got down to the end when I realized that we were five short. I was thinking, 'well, I guess we'll just kick in and make five more quilts.' Not five minutes later, I got a call from one of Blue Star Moms. She said, she had just come from church, and she had five more quilts that were dropped off there for the project. At that moment I was thinking, 'you've got to be kidding me.' Five was what we needed, and five is what we got."

Now that the group had fulfilled its self-induced quota, two tasks remained - hand sewing a custom label on each quilt and mailing them.

Each quilt was labeled with the following inscription: This quilt was made by the quilters of Las Cruces, N.M., and El Paso,

Texas to honor your family's sacrifice for our country. January 2012.

"As a military mother, you sacrifice not only your son or daughter, you sacrifice yourself too," said Debbie. "So if something happens to your husband, your father or your son, the loss is never repaid. If there is anything that I can pay back to someone who served our country and died, then it's very little."

"As a Blue Star mom, we feel that one of the hardest things is when your child goes to war," said Kelly. "You pray that you never get the phone call. Every time that you know that someone has received that phone call, your heart breaks, but you're thankful that it's not you. It's a very difficult situation to be in and I think the thing with the quilts, is they are made with so much love and so much joy, because you know this is something to comfort them. It's like making chicken noodle soup."

After raising enough money to mail them, the quilts made a 700-mile trek to Naval Special Warfare Command in Coronado, Calif.

From there, Patty Pybus, wife of Rear Adm. Sean Pybus, commander, Naval Special Warfare Command, unboxed the quilts and started matching up the quilts with the families of the fallen.

To respect the privacy of the quilt recipients, Cynthia and her band of quilters were not given their names or addresses. They received generic background information, enough to customize a quilt for each family member. Patty compiled a list for each family, numbered them and provided a brief description of each member. For example, Family 1 consists of a wife, mother, and a 14 year-old girl, or a wife and a six year-old boy. Patty and the Naval Special Warfare ombudsman team separated the quilts, boxed them back up and mailed them to the families.

"It's just not a warehouse of quilts that these were pulled out of; these ladies actually stitched every single quilt knowing that it was going to a four year-old girl, or a young mother, or a wife," said Patty. "To think that someone actually sat down, picked out the colors, went to the store and shopped for something with a person in mind that they never met is just amazing. It's just incredible that there are people out there who will take the time to do all of this work in hopes that it provides some comfort."

The timing of sending the quilts was also planned. Patty and the quilters knew that immediately following the crash, the families received support

from around the country, but feared that in the following months they would begin to bear the loss alone. Almost exactly six months later, the quilts reached the families.

"When we got over the shock of the loss of the whole team, we wanted to reach out in a way that was more than just temporary," said Kelly. "Most of the time what people do is they're there in the very beginning or give you something that may not last. Flags are good, but a quilt is something that you wrap around you when you're not feeling good or something that you sleep with and hopefully these are something that can be passed down from generation to generation."

Six months after losing their son, the parents of fallen SEAL, Chief Special Warfare Operator Jon T. Tumilson received their quilt in the mail. The thankful family sent a card to the quilters expressing their gratitude. It read:

"Thank you so much for the beautiful patriotic quilt made in honor of our son. We can feel the love that went into its making and it's like a big hug as we cover ourselves with it. Remembering the life of our loved one was made special by your thoughtful caring. Thank you!"

MC2 John Scorza

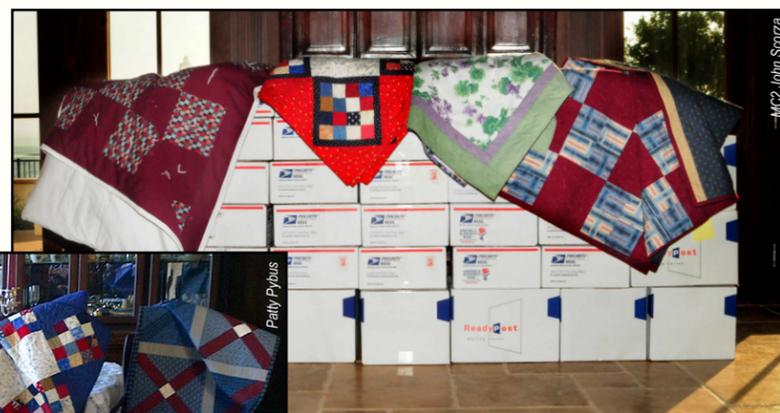


Marsha Cowan (left), owner of Bernina Sewing and Design, and Stephanie Snodgrass, quilting instructor and employee, pose for a photo within the sewing shop. Stephanie assisted Marsha in producing several quilts for the project.

Members of the Dona Ana Mothers (DAM) quilting group, (from left) Cynthia Harkwell Clark, Dianne Frank, Kathy Fitterer, Debbie Persinger and Lanna Scott, hold up a quilt made by the group. The DAM quilting group has made quilts for service members and their families across the country in an effort to bring hope and comfort to wounded warriors and the families of the fallen.



(Below) After the quilts were received by WARCOCM, Patty Pybus, wife of Rear Adm. Sean Pybus, commander, Naval Special Warfare Command, and the NSW ONBUDSMAN read each quilt's description and matched it with the needs of each family.



(Above) The quilts are boxed and ready to be mailed to the families of Extortion 17. They would reach the families almost exactly six months after the tragic incident.

