

Quilting to "Freedom's Price" to honor



Cynthia Harkwell Clark does not fit the mold of a stereotypical quilter. She is a far cry from the white-haired; sun-bonnet

wearing, little old lady hunched over in a rocking chair as she stitches a quilt.

In fact, the combination of her lifestyle, hobby, choices, and passion breaks through any preconceived limitations or expectations presented by today's society. Cynthia is a dedicated wife and mother of six children. She is also a successful businesswoman in Las Cruces, N.M., and leader in her community where her gentle humor, poignancy and deft balance of reason and emotion has touched many.

After years as a thriving attorney, Cynthia gave it all up to become proprietor of a local yarn shop, which eventually led to her current career as a professional quilter. Though this vocation she chose doesn't offer lucrative wages or a great retirement plan, her business provides this spirited patriot with an opportunity to share her passion for quilting and show her gratitude to the men and women who serve our country.

Closer inspection of Cynthia as she paces through her daily life is quite revealing. Without fail, she almost always wears a Blue Star Mothers of America pin, a proud display of her membership in the nationwide nonpartisan, nonpolitical group of mothers who promote patriotism and support our veterans and service members. Everybody who calls her cell phone is treated to the patriotic musings of the Zac Brown Band, until she picks up the receiver. While more than 2,000 miles of America's heartland separates Cynthia from her oldest son, a Midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, she proudly wears a Naval Academy shirt and sports a bumper sticker on her car - not for show or to boast; she does it out of love, pride and patriotism for her son and all service members.

Cynthia's compassion, influence and masterful craftsmanship are felt well beyond her community nestled along the banks of the Rio Grande. Her kindness and quilt masterpieces act as an extended hand of fellowship to comfort service members and their families across the country.

"A quilt is a hug that we give someone else," said Dianne Frank, Cynthia's friend, fellow quilter and Blue Star Mother. "It's a way of touching other people. It's a way for us to express our gratitude for what they have given."

Cynthia is the co-founder and former vice president of the Las Cruces Blue Star Mother's of

America chapter and a member of the Dona Ana Mothers (DAM) quilting group that is made up of many of the same Blue Star mothers. Currently, she is the Las Cruces Blue Star Mother's Blue to Gold liaison, working to assist families of fallen service members.

"I work with casualty officers, whenever we know of somebody from New Mexico or El Paso, we always ask if the family would like us to be there," said Cynthia.

During the past several years, while working with both groups, Cynthia has supported New Mexico service members and their families in a variety of ways. She has made quilts for wounded warriors and their families and families of the fallen. She has constructed Blue Star banners for new mothers and Gold Star banners for the mothers of the fallen. Her Blue Star Mothers chapter also sent a \$1500 Valentine's Day care package to New Mexico National Guardsmen serving in Afghanistan.

"We want to do whatever we can to help those in need, even if it's just one little thing, like a Gold Star banner that we hand make for a Mom who lost their child," said Cynthia. "Giving it to them is really hard, it's heartbreaking, but we want to keep doing it."

One of the amazing things about Cynthia and the groups she volunteers her time and talents with is that making quilts, banners and sending care packages to troops make up a small portion of their service to the armed forces community. Through Cynthia's leadership, involvement and endless hours of fundraising, they are able to make considerable strides in honoring those who so honorably serve.

"The Blue Star Mothers of America is a lot of fund raising," said Cynthia. "During our last event, the money we raised was to buy materials to ship quilts to Naval Special Warfare Command."

Recently, Cynthia led a group of Blue Star Mothers in a quilting project that yielded 64 quilts for the surviving families of Extortion 17, a helicopter crash in eastern Afghanistan that claimed the lives of 22 Naval Special Warfare operators, 17 of which were Navy SEALs.

Cynthia's dedication to the Blue Star Mothers and her local quilting group has captured the hearts of her peers and left a lasting impression.

"What did Cynthia do? What didn't Cynthia do?" Dianne Frank asked. "She brought the project to our attention, spearheaded it and



Photos by MC2 John Scorza

made sure it happened. I don't know when she sleeps. She does so much, even beyond Blue Star Moms. She's one of the most incredible women I've met. She cares so deeply and just wants to reach out and help others."

John Ruskin, the leading English art critic of the Victorian Era once said, "When love and skill work together, expect a masterpiece." While Cynthia's tireless acts of compassion and kindness are nothing short of extraordinary, her greatest accomplishment may be a work in progress, a quilt project called "Freedom's Price."

The 10x7 masterpiece is an impressive work of love and skill that memorializes the men and women who have lost their lives during Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom and the Global War on Terrorism. The names of more than 5,000 fallen service members lost in Iraq and Afghanistan are stitched into a work of intricate beauty, including a section with the names of Extortion 17 SEALs stitched in the shape of a Trident.

"Quilting is something that you can really pour your heart into," said Cynthia. "Freedom's Price" is something I started after my son left for the Naval Academy. I really had a hard time. He was my oldest and we are close, so I felt that I needed to do something."

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Freedom's Price has names stitched two ways. A good portion of names are hand-stitched in shapes, other names are stitched around objects and used as borders such as the 86 yellow stars lining the right and left sides of the quilt. Roughly eight names are around each star.

