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Project Linus comforts needy

S.J. CHAPTER HAS DONATED MORE THAN 6,000 HOMEMADE BLANKETS SINCE 2002

Khaled Khalifa told this story about a child and a blanket.

The 11-year-old Latina could not see or hear and could barely speak. Abandoned in infancy by her parents, she has lived with foster families her entire life. No one would adopt her. She also suffers from a host of medical problems that send her regularly to the hospital.

"This was a special child, the kind we know we're going to get now and then, who presented very difficult challenges" said Khalifa, a Santa Clara county social worker.

Dolores Wright and a dozen women of Project Linus listened quietly in her comfortable living room in Willow Glen. Most of them held blankets they had knitted, sewn or crocheted for ill or traumatized children. They call themselves "Blanketeers."

Khalifa continued: "We always have a `special' blanket waiting for such a child. When a blanket like that comes in, we just hold on to it."

On that particular day, Wright's living room featured more lovely blankets than any maternity ward. From simple fleece throws to intricate quilts, they filled the room with bright colors and themes for a child's eyes and touch: pink for preemies, flowers for girls, sports for boys.

But what made the blind girl's blanket, a quilt, so special?

Cleo Keita, the social worker who handles her case, said later by telephone, "It had a lot of color patterns and different writings -- love, peace, honesty. And it was very soft. She can't see it, but it's very warm. Blankets can be like a toy with a special meaning to a child."

"The blind child could touch the little animals and say their names," Khalifa said softly. "It relaxed her."

Khalifa had come that day to Wright's home hoping to collect more blankets. He was not disappointed.

"It actually becomes part of their identity," he said of children with troubled lives. "When they get moved from one place to another, it's often the only thing they take along with them. It's more than just a blanket."

Project Linus takes its name from the "Peanuts" character, a pajama-clad, thumb-sucking boy who won't give up his baby blue security blanket. The non-profit, all-volunteer organization -- www.sjlinus.org -- was born 10 years ago after a Colorado woman, Karen Loucks-Baker, read about a real-life little girl whose security blanket helped her cope with cancer treatments.

Today, with 376 chapters in all 50 states, Project Linus counts 1.4 million blankets created and donated to children close to home or far away. Twenty-four thousand went to Hurricane Katrina victims.

Not all of the blankets go to young children.

San Jose chapter coordinator Wright also had a story about another blanket -- one sent to an Ojibway Indian reservation in Minnesota, the scene of a grisly massacre last year at a high school. Among the injured was a football player who was shot in the face and paralyzed on one side of his body. When the

reservation called Project Linus for blankets, the San Jose chapter sent a quilt sewn with the image of a football field.

Months later, the reservation called Wright, who is retired, with news that made her beam: "She told me that boy still keeps the football quilt over his bed."

Like many of her 150 or so blanketeers, Wright sort of fell into the charity by looking for something to do with surplus blankets, shawls and throws.

"I was looking for some sort of volunteer work and where I could still quilt," said Norma Baumann of Willow Glen. "When you sew as much as I do, your family can get only so much."

Sarah Rahamim is one of the younger blanketeers in the group. A knitter, she said her husband threatened to throw out the mounds of tangled yarn accumulating in the garage and house.

Most of the blanketeers never get to actually see their creations do their charming magic on children. Rahamim is one who does. As an emergency room nurse at Valley Medical Center, she often delivers Linus blankets there and to other hospitals.

You wouldn't expect to see them in neonatal units, because the pre-mature infants usually are put inside Isolettes, or sterile, box-like units. A blanket, even a Linus blanket, would carry too many life-threatening germs.

"What happens," Rahamim explained, is that worried parents drape the blankets over the clear containers and then lay their heads on the blankets as if they covered their children.

"That's a wonderful experience to see," Rahamim said. The blankets also shield the infants from the harsh light and noise in intensive care units.

According to Wright, the San Jose chapter has donated more than 6,000 blankets since 2002 to just about any hospital, clinic or organization caring for children in need. The blanketeers range from the regulars who gather at Wright's home once a month to Girl Scout troops, churches and civic clubs who sponsor blanket-making events once a year.

Some organizations and companies donate money and materials, which is just fine with Wright. Blanket-quality yarn, fleece and sewn-on labels aren't cheap. Her goal is to raise enough money to buy all the materials and tools every volunteer needs, no matter how many blankets they want to weave.

"We can always use more money and volunteers," she said as the blanketeers filed out with bags stuffed with donated yarn, "because we have too many kids who need blankets."

Do you have a story idea for East Side/West Side? Contact Joe Rodriguez at (408) 920-5767 or jrodriguez@mercurynews.com.