

Made by Hand, From the Heart

Quilters Honor Virginian Soldiers

TODAY'S
WOMAN

By LIBBY CARTY McNAMEE

The Virginia Memorial Quilt Project is not your average oldfangled quilting bee. Instead of creating quilts for newlywed grandchildren, these women are engaged in a labor of love for people they never met.

With its motto of "Together, We Will Not Forget," the project has an altruistic purpose for fellow Virginians behind every stitch. This dedicated band of volunteers has committed to making a quilt for the closest relative of every soldier from Virginia who has given his or her life during the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Although I cannot see your faces, your loving hands give testament to our country," a grateful mother wrote after receiving a quilt.

A Pioneering Project

The first of its kind in the nation, the VMQP is the culmination of the efforts of its enthusiastic and dedicated chair, Debbie Elam, and vice-chair, Estelle Davis, Elam's 82-year-old mother.

Since their launch last summer, the quilters have completed 51 quilts, all at least 72 by 90 inches. This is quite a feat, especially considering each quilt takes approximately 30 to 40 hours to make.

Quilters across the state have gotten involved in the project. They work both alone and in small groups, gathering together every month or so for a group workday.

In addition to providing the quilt itself, the VMQP has also created a website at www.vmqp.com with a page dedicated to each of the fallen soldiers along with a photo of the quilt presented. Quilters in several other states have already contacted the group, seeking advice for setting up similar organizations.

The volunteers divide up the duties as they patiently proceed through the variety of steps to customize each quilt. First, one volunteer selects the pattern and fabric. Then, others wash and iron the fabric and then cut it into pieces.

Another volunteer sews the top together with a quarter-inch seam. Yet another volunteer quilts the top, batting and backing with long arm quilting machines, adding a binding to cover the raw edges of the quilt. Lastly, a helper sews a label on the back of the quilt with the soldier's name, hometown and the date of death.

Covered by Comfort

As a result of their dedication, quilters of the VMQP have provided comfort to many family members, grateful to have such a wonderful tribute to their loved one.

"I don't ever want to put it down," one grieving mother declared. "It's difficult to describe the love I feel emanating from every stitch, and the corresponding love I feel in return."



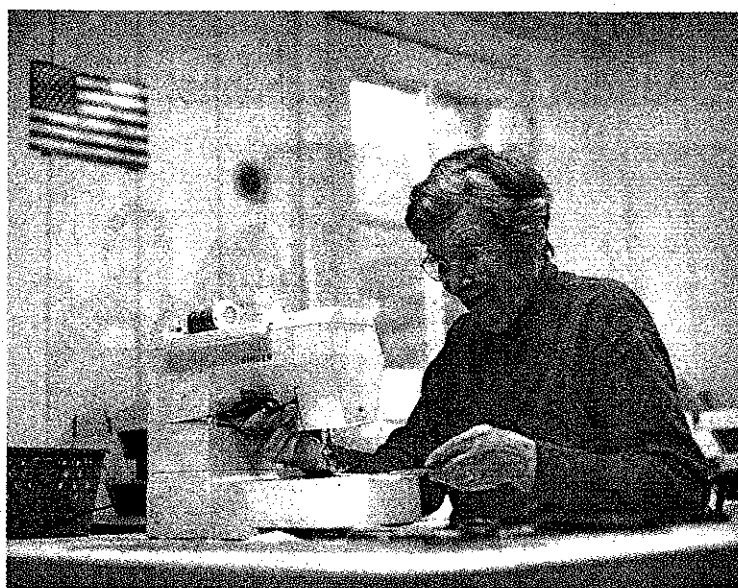
The volunteers have formed an especially close bond with Midlothian resident Dick Linn, who suffered the loss of his son Karl, a 2002 graduate of James River High School and a Virginia Commonwealth University engineering student. Karl died while serving in Iraq.

"I can't say enough. After meeting them for an afternoon, I felt like I had a whole lot more family," said Linn in a recent interview. "After going through

such a tragedy, it is so nice to know there are people out there who care so much on a grass-roots level. The world could use more people like them."

Quilts for Children

The VMQP has also been a tremendous source of support for a 10-year-old girl named Brooke who misses her father terribly. The vol-



Estelle Davis began the Virginia Memorial Quilt Project in 2006 with her daughter Debbie Elam. She and others have made more than 50 quilts for families of Virginia's fallen soldiers. (Photos: Frost)

unteers made her a customized quilt weaving red, her favorite color, with her father's favorite color, blue.

In addition, since Brooke loves to write about her father, they created a special page on their website called "The Children—Brooke's Notes," a place for children grieving the loss of a parent to post and share their stories and poems.

The VMQP recently made a quilt for Colin, a brokenhearted three-year-old boy who wanted to know, "Why is Daddy mad at me and won't come home?"

The volunteers mailed him his own special quilt with the message, "When you wrap up in this quilt, just think of having your dad's arms wrapped around you."

Meaningful Work

Among other accolades, the VMQP has received a letter of appreciation from a retired Brigadier General as well as one from Governor Tim Kaine who thanked the group for their "gracious work on behalf of our fallen heroes."

"It is a real joy for me to do [this]," said Elam. "If I died today, I would feel like I've made a difference. Families who have received quilts tell me, 'Please don't stop making them.'"

Elam continued with a smile, "You can bet we won't."

The VMQP is funded by the generosity of donors. If you are

Memorial Quilt Project" and send it to 2621 Linbrook Drive, Richmond, VA 23228. If you wish to volunteer or to provide contact information for the family of a fallen soldier, please refer to the VMQP website at www.vmqp.com, call (804) 794-6364, or email debelam1@aol.com. **FF**

Libby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer and former Army JAG officer, thankful for the volunteers' generosity for the grieving families of Virginia, epitomizing the American spirit at its finest.



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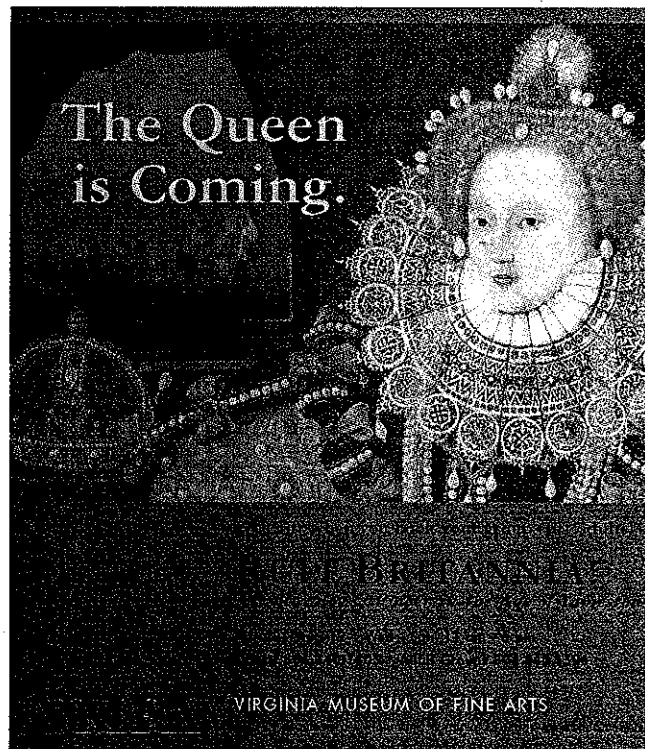
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