

## Project Linus sews good will for patients

By Jennifer Best

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Mario Soto doesn't really care what his classmates have to say about his crocheting and sewing habit. It calms his nerves, helps him think, and ultimately provides blankets for children in need.

"When they try to bug me, I just go with it. It doesn't really matter what they say; I'm helping other people who need it," the eighth-grader said.

Mario is one of several students, staff members and community members at large who take part in Tommie Kunst Junior High School's Project Linus outreach effort.

The national, nonprofit organization aligns fiber artists with hospitals, shelters and emergency services organizations to provide handmade blankets to children who are seriously ill, traumatized, or otherwise in need.

Project Linus began in 1995 in Denver and has since expanded to include nearly 400 chapters across the United States. On any given day, an estimated 60,000 "blanketeers" are knitting, quilting, crocheting or sewing blankets fit for toddlers or teens.

"It's rewarding to know you made something for somebody who needs it," said Elsa Wong, a computer specialist at the school and a master with yarn.

On any given Monday during the academic year, students, teachers and staff drop their traditional campus roles for an hour to gather in Cindy Cornejo's classroom. They visit and swap crafting secrets while building a pile of blankets, which ultimately are donated to hospitals and other local organizations.

There is no prerequisite, and more than a few active blanketeers joined the project with no previous experience and no particular skill in sewing or yarn work.

"I made a scarf in college, but it turned out to be about 7 yards long, and that was a very long time ago," laughed Schelli Acosta, a teacher on special assignment with Santa Maria-Bonita School District and now a regular contributor to the effort.

But with pointers from fellow teachers and students alike, Acosta and other relative beginners like her have worked together to create nearly 100 soft, colorful, creative blankets that have been donated to Marian Medical Center, Cottage Hospital and a local support group for teen parents.

People from throughout the community also take part, some dropping by blankets they've made at home, other donating materials.

Thanks to grant writing by Kathy Farger, a program specialist with the school district, Altrusa International has provided funding for three years to help keep the project in yarn, fabric and other related supplies.

"I like seeing the community connect between the junior high school and Santa Maria Valley in general," Cornejo said. "I also enjoy the unique relationships we build during this special time together."

Jessica Bautista, now an eighth-grader, has made four blankets since joining the effort last year. She enjoys the simplicity of the colorful, soft fleece blankets as well as the potential complexity of crochet. She also likes the social aspect of the group.

"You get to know these teachers better than you would otherwise, so you feel like you know they're there if you need help," she said.

The relationships built over fabric, yarn and time continue well beyond junior high school years. Students such as Maria Tun, an inaugural member of the club, continue to work with the project, and visit their alma mater, though they've already graduated from the school.

"It's not for me, it's for the little kids," said Tun, now a senior at Pioneer Valley High School.

She's made dozens of blankets for the effort, often completed at home.

Tun began crocheting in the classroom during lunch breaks and after school when the local project began in 2007. She liked the creative outlet, but discovered additional perks when she began taking her projects home to complete in her spare time there.

"My mom had told me that she used to make things, but I'd never seen her sew. She's incredible," Tun recalled.

It turns out her mother, Ruth Tun, had a hidden talent not simply for sewing, but for creating her own patterns in fabric or yarn and seeing them through. Her daughter's interest in the craft sparked her to return to it.

Now the two share their time trading crafters' shortcuts while talking about their lives and current events.

“She teaches me different patterns and shortcuts and we talk about all sorts of things. We have great communication,” Tun said.

And while her daughter has long since graduated from junior high, she continues to inspire, encourage and educate through Project Linus.

Belinda Hammond, a pediatric volunteer at Marian, was once on the receiving end of the program. Her son, then 2, was given a Project Linus blanket while recovering from a serious illness at Cottage Hospital. Five years later, he still carries the blanket now and again.

For more information about Project Linus, or to contribute to the project, contact Joy Wilcox at 961-8055 or Cornejo at 361-5808.



Leah Thompson/Staff Marian Medical Center volunteer Belinda Hammond, right, with the help of incoming principal Sharon Shell, bags up blankets and beanies hand-made and donated by teachers, students and friends of Tommy Kunst Junior High School through Project Linus to Marian.