

They're sewing 'til the troops come home



With the space provided at her store, Carol Beachtold (left) has joined the effort organized by Carroll Smith and others to provide a touch of home and comfort to troops serving overseas. The group meets every other week at the west Plano sewing shop to assemble neckcoolers and other handmade pieces like helmet liners that are then shipped straight to the frontlines.

Handmade comfort from home By Britney Porter

A percussion of sewing machines rumbles below the voices of eight ladies at Plano's Compu-Sew: Carroll Smith, G. Headen, and Elaine Taylor from Plano; Faith Younse from Allen; Karla Rogue from McKinney; Peggy Lathrop from Garland; Phyliss George from Rockwall; and Gaye McKinley from Wylie. The owner of Compu-Sew, Carol Beachtold, has opened a back room in the store for volunteers to make neck coolers for American troops.

"It feels good to help because I was in

the military myself," says volunteer Karla Rogue who was a licensed vocational nurse in the military from '73 to '76 and is currently a registered nurse at Methodist Medical Center. "If someone had done this for me it would have been greatly appreciated. It's really hot in Iraq and I can sympathize with the troops."

The neck coolers are like comforting hugs to the troops in Iraq where temperatures reach around 120 degrees Fahrenheit in June, July and August.

One of the driving forces behind this

local project is Carroll Smith. She is a member of the Mary Shirley McGuire chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). She is also a military mom. Her son Kevin (who is a husband and father of two boys) returned from Iraq in February after being there for a year. Smith receives personal feedback from Kevin and other family members, like her son-in-law's nephew. "He said, 'the neck coolers saved our lives.'"

Last winter DAR members crocheted and knitted around 600 helmet liners

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for troops overseas, and Smith said she took that idea and ran with it. “I went down to the Plano Senior Center – they have a wonderful ladies’ knitting and crocheting group that meets every Friday – and I put the idea before them and they just jumped right on it. We have now sent around 250 - 300 neck coolers and over 850 of the helmet liners.”

The neck coolers are a strip of cloth 45 inches long and 5 inches wide with a seam down the middle. A teaspoon of garden crystals, which are the size of BB’s, is placed in each side with a PCV pipe and funnel. Garden crystals are made for flower beds or flower pots to retain water, so when the neck coolers are placed in water, the garden crystals swell. “They will retain the coolness for hours and hours, and you can re-cool them,” says Smith. “If we could get enough made to send each troop two, it’d be wonderful because they could keep one soaking in cold water.”

With the various jobs involved in making a neck cooler – from cutting, pressing, and turning the fabric inside out, to filling the neck cooler with garden crystals – one doesn’t need to know how to sew. Supervised children, teenagers, or young adults may participate for community service hours.

Other ways to get involved include contributing financially toward the materials or the shipping. Smith suggested donating fabric or coupons from Jo-Ann Stores. Fabric needs to be 100 percent cotton and within the color range of camouflage. Solid dark blue or red, white and blue fabric for the Navy is also appreciated.

“Our guys and girls over there are seeing nothing but negative press about the war, and every little bit that we can do to stretch our support and our love is something that will boost their spirits,” Smith says.

Faith Younse, treasurer of the DAR chapter, suggested that

DAR set aside a fund to pay for the shipping of the neck coolers and helmet liners. To save on cost, they are shipped by Priority Mail. So, no matter how much each box weighs, the flat rate is \$8.25. About 15 neck coolers and 15 helmet liners fit in one box.

The volunteers at Compu-Sew also sew flat quilted bears for American troops to carry in their pockets and hand out to Iraqi children. A tag on each one reads in English and in Arabic, “To the children of Iraq from the children of America.”

“The story is told that a military mom sent some bears to her son and he gave them out to his tanker troops,” says Smith. “In about a week, they were going down a street and there was a little girl about 5 years old sitting in the middle of the street. She was crying her eyes out and rocking back and forth. The little girl refused to move but the troops couldn’t go around her. So finally, the son gets out and goes over to her and tries to get her to move, but she cries harder. She begins pointing to the ground, and she was sitting on a land mine. I don’t know exactly how they accomplished getting



The classroom in Compu-Sew in Plano is transformed each week into an assembly line by volunteers like G. Headen (above), Gaye McKinley (right) and others.



Profile photography



her off without anybody getting hurt. I asked my son Kevin and he said you quickly and very gently slide her off and put something of equal weight in place. Well, they got her off and she saved all those soldiers, and she was holding one of those bears.”

From the bears to the helmet liners and neck coolers, a common thread among all of these gifts is the touch of comfort. “Our guys are out there sacrificing for us and I think we should be doing something for



Faith Younse shows how Sew Much Comfort adapts clothing for use by injured troops.

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them,” said Phyliss George. “I’m from a military family so this is something that is very near to my heart.”

Many of the volunteers at Compu-Sew are involved in other similar projects. For example, Peggy Lathrop, who is from Garland, has been affiliated with The Ships Project since 2001, and Faith Younse is a part of Sew Much Comfort, a national organization that creates adaptive clothing for the wounded. “Some of our men and women are burned, so we open up the seams and put Velcro in place so they can put clothes on over their neck and arms. We also sew undergarments for

when they have injured their legs,” Younse said.

The group at Compu-Sew does not have a name yet, but the ladies are asking the community for suggestions and most importantly for help. Said G. Headen, “We will work until the troops come home!”

Support our troops from 11 a.m. – 2 p.m. every other Thursday at Plano’s Compu-Sew located at 3237 Independence Pkwy. (on the southwest side of Independence and Parker Road). E-mail G. Headen at cdgh@aol.com or call her at 972-424-7081, or call Carroll Smith at 972-359-7677 for more information.

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