

Stitching Together Community: Dunlap's "Thursday Group" Quilters Mark Decades of Friendship and Service

DUNLAP, Iowa (AP) — What began as a simple quilting class has turned into more than two decades of friendship, creativity and community service for a group of local women known simply as the "Thursday Group."

The group's story dates back to the early 2000s, when several women found themselves in the same quilting class at a shop in Arcadia.

"We started taking classes at the quilt shop in Arcadia. It was always the same group of women," said Donelle Druivenga. "We all signed up for the same class and then we got to be really good friends. We just kind of gravitated toward each other."

Founding members included Kay Boyce, Annie Hoffman, Diane Ettleman, Mary Jo Bonsall, Lois Thompson and Druivenga. When the classes ended, the women weren't ready to part ways. Instead, they created their own routine — meeting once a week to continue quilting together.

"We would get together one day a week so we could all work on the same project," Druivenga said. "If we got stuck, we were all there to help each other and talk through it."

Initially, the group met at the Arcadia quilt shop, but after it closed, they met at Druivenga's home before eventually settling into Thompson's basement in Dunlap in the fall of 2006.

"We outgrew the space," Bonsall said of their earlier meeting spot.

Since then, Thompson's basement has become a permanent gathering place, outfitted with sewing machines, fabric and decades of shared memories.

"Basically, we just set it up down there," Bonsall said. "If you want to leave your machine, you can leave your machine."

"And we all have extra machines now," she added with a laugh. "Twenty years ago, lugging those was a chore."

In the early years, members met Thursday evenings after work. As time passed and more members retired, those evenings stretched into full-day gatherings.

"Eventually everybody retired, so we started doing it all day Thursday," Thompson said.

The schedule remains flexible, with members coming and going as needed. Meals are often shared, whether homemade or brought in, adding to the group's relaxed, social atmosphere.

Today, regular participants include Penny Bolton, Bonsall, Thompson, Druivenga, Paula Riester and occasionally Ettleman. Others have come and gone over the years, but the group continues to welcome anyone interested.

"If you want to show up, show up. If you want to learn to quilt, we'll take you in," Druivenga said.

While quilting has always been at the center of their gatherings, the group's purpose has evolved. What started as a social circle has grown into a force for community good.

"It was a social group and we shared our interest and we worked on quilts together," Bonsall said. "Then we started doing more mission work."

That shift became especially meaningful during the COVID-19 pandemic, when isolation weighed heavily on many in the community.

“We kind of started charitable work during COVID because Mom was feeling lonely. Everybody was feeling so isolated,” Druivenga said. “We decided we would make placemats and give them to the Dunlap Senior Center, and when meals were delivered, they would hand them out.”

The effort extended to “mug rugs” and other small handmade items — simple gestures meant to remind recipients they were not alone.

“We just wanted people to know we still cared,” Druivenga said.

Since then, the group’s charitable work has expanded significantly. They have created hundreds of bookmarks for the local library, often responding to repeated requests as supplies run out.

“They said a need they had was bookmarks, and one year we sewed 300,” Druivenga said. “Then they called and said they were out, so we did more. I can’t even tell you how many we’ve done.”

The group has also produced hundreds of handmade book bags for children in summer reading programs, helping protect books and encourage literacy.

Their outreach doesn’t stop there. Each year, Druivenga and Thompson create “Quilts of Honor” for local veterans and quilts for fire department members, recognizing service and sacrifice in the community.

“Since my dad was a fireman for over 50 years, we needed to start doing something for the fire department,” Druivenga said.

They also sew lap quilts for nursing home residents and are currently working on “quilted hugs” — wearable shawls designed to provide warmth and comfort to individuals in nursing homes, cancer treatment centers and dialysis facilities.

In addition, the group has supported foster care organizations by making quilts and pillowcases for children, as well as creating items for shelters serving women and children fleeing difficult situations.

“Those foster kids sometimes don’t have anything,” Riester said.

The group’s impact is made possible not only by its members, but also by supportive family. Riester’s husband, Mike, helps cut fabric into strips and squares, preparing materials so the group can focus on sewing.

“He’s got them all bagged so all you do is just sit down and start sewing,” Druivenga said.

Despite the many projects and hours of work, members say the heart of the Thursday Group remains its sense of connection.

“It’s very important to me — the social aspect,” Bonsall said. “I don’t know how I would have handled those early COVID years without it. We all felt that. We have and continue to see each other through life’s challenges.”

Over the years, the group has also built traditions beyond their weekly meetings. They’ve also hosted multi-day quilting retreats, sewing late into the night, sharing meals and even playing games for fabric prizes.

“We used to gamble with fat quarters,” Thompson said with a laugh.

After more than 20 years, the group shows no signs of slowing down. New ideas continue to emerge, and projects remain in steady rotation.

“We keep trying to think of new things that we haven’t done before,” Riester said.

For Bonsall, the group’s legacy is clear.

“I’m proud of all of our accomplishments,” she said. “We have affected a lot of people with our quilts.”

And for Druivenga, the future is just as certain.

“We’re not going to stop for anything,” she said.

What began as a quilting class has become something much more — a lasting thread of friendship, generosity and community woven into the fabric of Dunlap.

