

PROJECT LINUS

by Meredith Bean McMath

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My friend Joni Crane moved from Virginia in 1999 and was there for all of 20 minutes, it seemed, before she became deeply involved in a non-profit group called Project Linus. Project Linus provides hand-made quilts to traumatized and seriously ill children. A national organization with a home base in Douglas County, Project Linus has no paid staff and relies on donations and hours and hours of busy, generous hand-work. Joni was asked to create a video to promote Project Linus and she readily agreed. When she taped an interview with the Founder and Director of Project Linus, Karen Loucks Baker, wife of famous drummer Ginger Baker, Joni found Karen's enthusiasm absolutely infectious. Joni then videotaped a quilting bee where families, friends and strangers gathered to sew blankets, working together as though they were sewing strength into the very fabric of life, and she visited the hospitals and videotaped children and youth whose faces lit up when they were given a chance to choose a hand-made quilt for themselves. When her Project Linus video was complete, Joni sat down and started making her first blanket.

And then Joni discovered she lived twenty minutes from a high school named Columbine.

As the news unfolded that day, Joni's church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, began to plan a service in Columbine that evening: a combination memorial service, prayer vigil and comfort station. All 126 Columbine High School students who were members of that church were able to attend but one: Michael. Michael was in the hospital, fighting for his life after being shot three times.

The church brought in counselors that night, with plans to create open discussion groups to help them begin the grieving process.

Joni called Karen Baker and asked her if there were any quilts left from their annual quilting bee that might be appropriate for teens. There were only 26. "Karen, I feel so strongly we should be making blankets for each of these students." "Well, you should always go with those strong feelings. We'll find a way."

That night, they took the quilts to the service, approached the organizers and told them about Project Linus. The gentleman in charge said, "That's very kind of you, but these aren't six-year olds." "Well," Joni said, "I think you underestimate what they can do for them. If you don't mind, we'll just leave them for the counselors to decide. If the kids don't want them, we'll just come back for them tomorrow."

The counselors brought the students together 25 at a time and tried to get them to open up. But they wouldn't cry. They wouldn't talk. They sat in stunned silence, with equally stunned parents standing by their sides. The counselors looked at each other and decided to ask the parents to leave. They left.

But the children still wouldn't cry. Wouldn't talk. One counselor looked at the pile of blankets on the floor, and, for lack of a better idea, said, "Some ladies dropped these by. They're hand-made blankets made by the community for you. Each of you can take one if you like." Slowly, quietly, they came forward, and plucked a blanket from the pile. Every one of them took one, even the football player.

They wrapped the blankets up around themselves and sat down. The football player tied his around his waist.

And then something amazing happened. They began to cry. They began to talk.

But when the next group came to sit down, there was only one blanket left.

Once more there was silence.

The phone calls started the next morning: "I'm sorry. We were wrong." "Send more blankets... Please, please send more blankets."

Thus commenced a marathon. Joni let the local news know she'd hold a round-the-clock quilting bee in her home. Sally Monegan showed up at Joni's door at 7: 15 a.m. A small, spry eighty-something, Sally was holding a sewing machine in one hand and a serger in the other. Within a few hours, over sixty women had arranged themselves at stations throughout the house. Dominos Pizza delivered... free. A fabric store donated yards of goods. The fabric was washed and sent to the ironing boards, then to the ladies in the basement who sewed the batting to the fabric, then sent up the stairs to the seven souls piecing quilt tops in the dining room table, then to the living room where they finished them with yarn ties, then to the kitchen nook to have the "Project Linus" label sewn into the corners. Sally Monegan stayed all day. They turned out 150 tied quilts in 24 hours.

And the next day, Joni received a phone call she will never forget. It was from a mother of one of the students. "I've called to thank you," she said. "My son was in the library. He watched his best friend be shot to death, and his tee-shirt was splattered with his friend's blood. When he came out of there, he wouldn't change his clothes. Three days he wore that shirt. He couldn't sleep. Three days and nothing seemed to help. Then he was given one of your blankets. And he told me that when he got it, the blanket became a reminder to him of what he'd been through, and he could take off the bloodied shirt. And he could sleep."

Project Linus had started to work its magic, but, out of 1800 Columbine students, so far only 163 had been able to receive blankets.

It was then Joni and ten women representing various churches decided to organize a two-day quilting bee in Littleton. The major networks covered the story on the nightly news.

During the Quilt-a-Thon, a gentleman came in looking for the organizer. Someone pointed to Joni, and he approached her. He was holding some folded blue fabric, and he was so choked up he couldn't speak. He handed her a note which had been written by his wife:

"Dear Project Linus: We read what you were doing in The Rocky Mountain News. My boys won't ask for blankets, but they need them. They are both members of the Columbine Wrestling Team, and these are their tee-shirts. If it's possible, would you please find a way to work them into two quilts? When you see what's printed on the back of these shirts, you'll understand why I ask you to incorporate them."

At that point, the father held up a shirt with the Columbine Wrestling Team logo on the front. He turned it around so Joni could read the team motto: "Built to Last."

The Quilting Bee went on for a third day. The quilters wouldn't stop. Neither did the phone calls.

The widow of Dave Sanders, the teacher who so heroically gave up his life to protect his students, called to ask for five blankets for their five grandchildren. She didn't ask for one for herself, but the Project Linus organizers agreed and it was done: a special quilt they'd been reserving, a gorgeous froth of white Victoriana representing hundreds of hours of one very gifted quilter's work, was given to her in her husband's memory.

When we grow up, we leave behind our security blankets and attach ourselves to larger things: jobs and homes and families and friends. One monstrous act of evil reminds us the world is not at all secure, yet we are built to last. If we had had the honor of standing, as Joni did, in the middle of that auditorium, we would know it. We would have seen the High School students come in and choose blankets for themselves, seen grieving parents and youth comforted by strangers, and observe a community healing itself through an act of relentless unselfishness, surrounding their children with a blanket of such strength and such love, they can not help but realize the world is not an evil place, and that right there, in the warmth of their community, they will find everything they need in order to rebuild their souls, and they will be built to last.

Best of all, beyond a shadow of a doubt I know this: if it had happened here, we would have done the same.