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Volunteers sew precious memories for grieving families

By Nancy Twigg
Saturday, May 23, 2009



Adam Brimer

Sally Oster received a teddy bear made from husband Ludwig Oster's military shirt and patches after he died in 2008. The bear was created by a volunteer through Threads of Grace, a program offered to families of Caris Healthcare hospice patients.



Adam Brimer

The bear made from Sgt. Ludwig Oster's Marine Corps uniform has an arm raised in a permanent salute to Oster and his military service.

Families who've lost loved ones to a terminal illness walk a difficult path. They must continue their life journey carrying a heavy load of grief.

A small gift - carefully and lovingly made from an article of that loved one's clothing - is a gentle way Caris Healthcare is extending a hand to help.

Threads of Grace is a program offered to families of Caris hospice patients. After a patient's death, Caris sends a sympathy card to the family. Included with the card is information about how they can receive a keepsake made from a piece of the deceased's clothing. These mementos are handcrafted by local volunteers who work with Caris to make this service available.

"This project is a great way for the family to have a special way to remember their loved one - the way the person smelled, the feel of his or her favorite article of clothing," says Kirby Cleland, Caris Healthcare volunteer coordinator.

Loudon County resident Sally Oster can personally attest to the good being done by Threads of Grace. In February, she received a teddy bear made from one of her husband Ludwig's military shirts.

"Ludwig was in the Marine Corps for four years after high school," Sally explains. "After we retired and moved to Tennessee, he was part of the Volunteer State Veterans Honor Guard. He was very supportive of the military and always ready to volunteer again if he was needed."

Mr. Oster had multiple myeloma, a form of bone marrow cancer. With the grit and determination of a true soldier, he fought the disease for six years. When his oncologist said the treatments were no longer helping, the Osters chose Caris to provide hospice services. In August 2008, a team of Caris staff members began working to make him as comfortable as possible during his

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To learn more about volunteer opportunities with Threads of Grace, contact Caris Volunteer Coordinator Cindy McDaniel by phone (865-988-8034) or e-mail

(cmcdaniel@carishealthcare.com).

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last months.

"They were there until the very end, even when he died on Christmas Day," Sally says, remembering how registered nurse Jennifer Yonke of Knoxville cried along with the family when Ludwig passed. "They are amazing people. I can't imagine dealing with death on an everyday basis the way they do."

When Sally heard about Threads of Grace, she knew immediately which item she wanted and that she wanted it to be made from one of Ludwig's uniform shirts. What Sally didn't know was how far volunteer Darlene Ballinger would go in making the teddy bear extraordinary.

Lenoir City resident Ballinger took the rank insignias off the sleeves and sewed them on the bear's chest. She also tacked the bear's right paw to its forehead to form a salute. Sally was overwhelmed by the finished product.

"It was very emotional for me when I received it," says Sally. "It reminded me of what a loyal,

patriotic person he was. Because he was so proud of service to his country, using the military shirt was very appropriate."

The months since Ludwig's death have been difficult, but having the bear has made the process of grief a little easier to endure. Sally keeps the bear in her bedroom where she can see and talk to it daily.

"I am very grateful to the volunteer who made this bear," Sally says. "It is a tangible remembrance of all the good things Lud stood for."

Nancy Twigg is a freelance contributor to the News Sentinel.

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