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Crafty ladies : Local knitter, quilters provide cozy coverings for Visiting Nurse & Hospice Care patients

By MARILYN MCMAHON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

December 4, 2012 5:50 AM

"I'm a crafty old witch," giggled Eileen May Ayling as she set aside the turquoise afghan she was knitting to tell the News-Press why, at the age of 87, she enjoys making the cozy coverings for Visiting Nurse & Hospice Care patients.

"When I get to heaven, everything I do now, the Lord will wipe another black mark off my slate," she said, adding with another laugh, "I can't see very well, can't hear either. I've lost all my senses except my sense of humor."

On a more serious note, Mrs. Ayling, who lives with her daughter, Kathy Beggs, in Goleta, said, "Making these afghans for Visiting Nurse patients has become my passion. I understand that comfort can be hard to come by for these patients, so my hope is that the afghans can provide a little warmth. I may have plenty of exciting stories from my past, but what I do now fills my heart with joy and gives the work I do greater meaning."

Asked about those "exciting stories," the native of London revealed that she was once a clerk for the British Radar Section during World War II, working undercover in the basement of Harrods, one of the world's most famous department stores.

"I left school at the age of 14 to learn to be a stenographer at Pitman's College in London. For two years, I worked for a firm that published newspapers, and when I was 18, I was conscripted — called up for World War II — to be a stenographer," Mrs. Ayling recalled.

"I was so happy the admiralty accepted me after I took the tests and was interviewed. In the ranking of places to work, admiralty was the

top choice with the army, air force and factory work ranking second, third and fourth," she said.

"No one knew that the radar unit was in the department store. We were completely blocked off. I was secretary to one of the top men, whose rank I didn't know because they didn't wear uniforms. I sent messages to ships when radar was to be installed. Sometimes, the messages came back because the ship had sunk. It was very sad," said Mrs. Ayling, her voice still quivering with emotion many decades later.

One night on her way home on the train, an American soldier asked her for directions to a certain stop, where he planned to see his buddy.

"It was the same station as mine, and we began chatting. He asked if he could see me that evening. I said, 'Oh, no, I couldn't do that. It wouldn't be proper.' But when he told me he was leaving for France the next day, I changed my mind," said Mrs. Ayling, smiling.

The couple were married May 8, 1945, and after the service, they came out of the church to hear bells ringing all over England.

"It was the end of the war in Europe," she said. "We drove into London to join the celebration. There were Americans in buses driving round and round Piccadilly Circus."



Knitting afghans for Visiting Nurse & Hospice Care patients is a full-time hobby for Eileen May Ayling, 87, who describes herself with amusement as "a crafty old witch" who has "lost all my senses, except my sense of humor."

THOMAS KELSEY/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



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Mrs. Ayling, who has been widowed three times, has lived in Santa Barbara since the 1950s. For 25 years, she worked in the Santa Barbara County Clerk's office, retiring in 1978.

Her passion for needlework began when she was 7 years old and became seriously ill with pneumonia.

"I was given last rites," said Mrs. Ayling. "I was sick for a year, and during that time, my nurse taught me to embroider, knit and crochet. All my life I have been making things for charity, always for charity."

She began knitting afghans for VNHC in Santa Barbara after borrowing a walker for several months from the nonprofit, which provides comprehensive home health and hospice services in Santa Barbara.

"To thank them, I gave them two of my afghans. That's when I was asked if I would be willing to make more afghans for the patients. I also make smaller blankets for the VNHC's Pet Therapy dogs so they can sit on patients' beds," said Mrs. Ayling, who has two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

In addition to her afghans, VNHC is receiving 40 colorful quilts from the Coastal Quilters Guild of Santa Barbara and Goleta, which was started in 1988.

"Each year, the guild selects a local charitable organization to receive quilts and other items made by guild members through their Community Quilts program," said Barbara MacCallum, 74.

Past recipients have included Hillside House, Food From the Heart, St. Vincent's and Unity Shoppe.

Mrs. MacCallum and three other guild members are in charge of the program this year. They are Edalee Keehn, Nancy Miller and Carol Hart.

"Of the 275 members in the guild, about 60 make the quilts," said Mrs. Keehn, 69. "The quilts are made from kits that include fabric for the top and back of the quilt and batting for the filling. Also included is a label to be sewn on the finished piece that says, 'Presented by Coastal Quilters Guild of Santa Barbara and Goleta.' "

Mrs. MacCallum said that the committee meets weekly year-round to assemble the kits that are packed in plastic bags about 12-by-14 inches.

"Some pick up their kits one week and bring their finished quilts back the next week. Some we have to remind after six or eight months," said Mrs. Keehn with a chuckle during an interview at the MacCallum home.

"Some will use fabric from their own stash, which is what quilters call pieces of material they have collected over the years," added Mrs. MacCallum.

Both stressed that the quilts go to people to be used in their own homes.

"We give the quilts to organizations who distribute them to individuals. We don't have contact with the recipients, but we get many nice letters of appreciation and thank you cards," Mrs. Keehn said, adding that in January, Marty Frolli, a guild member, will teach an Adult Ed class at the Wake Center in making quilts to be donated to local charitable organizations.

"Members of the Coastal Quilters Guild enjoy using their talents to make quilts for VNHC this year. Our hope is that the care and love with which they are made may bring comfort to recipients and their families," Mrs. MacCallum said.

email: mmcmahon@newspress.com

FYI

To donate yarn or quilting materials to Visiting Nurse & Hospice Care, call Arlene Stepputat at 690-6274 or email her at arlene.stepputat@vnhcsb.org.

For more information about VNHC, call Rick Keith at 690-6222 or email him at rick.keith@vnhcsb.org.

For more information about the Coastal Quilters Guild of Santa Barbara and Goleta, call 964-6476 or go to www.coastalquilters.org.



Top photo, Barbara MacCallum, left, and Edalee Keehn display three of the colorful quilts donated to VNHC by the Coastal Quilters Guild of Santa Barbara and Goleta. The women are members of the guild's Community Quilts program.

Bottom photo, "The quilts are made from kits that include fabric for the top and back of the quilt and batting for the filling. Also included is a label to be sewn on the finished piece that says, 'Presented by Coastal Quilters Guild of Santa Barbara and Goleta,' said Edalee Keehn.



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Top photo, Eileen May Ayling began knitting afghans for VNHC in Santa Barbara after borrowing a walker for several months from the nonprofit, which provides comprehensive home health and hospice services in Santa Barbara. "To thank them, I gave them two of my afghans," she said.

Bottom photo, It's a wrap in one of her finished afghans for Mrs. Ayling, who was born in London and learned to knit and do other needlework when she was 7 years old and recovering from a serious illness.



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