



When It's Okay to *Fidget*

BY KIM J. GIFFORD
PHOTOS BY CALEB KENNA



CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Betty Schneider (blue sweater), Joanne Sullivan, Ellen Sutherland, Kathy Connors, Kay Bergquist and Barbara Lacy. The Ladies of Union Church of Proctor in Proctor, Vermont make Fidget Quilts for people with dementia, Alzheimer's and autism.

Kay Bergquist,
LEFT, and Barbara
Lacy, RIGHT, confer
on a quilt.



It is a Saturday afternoon at the Union Church of Proctor. Sun streams through the windows of the large room where a clutch of women have gathered with sewing machines and fabrics to create Fidget Quilts for Alzheimer's patients at community nursing homes and for autistic children in the area. It is too warm outside for a typical November day, and inside, the atmosphere is just as warm with chattering, laughter, and the hustle and bustle of these busy ladies engaged in community outreach.

Fidget Quilts are small quilts roughly 20- to 24-inches square, designed to sit in the laps of Alzheimer's patients and provide their hands with something to do. According to the American Alzheimer's Association, in 2015, an estimated 5.3 million Americans of all ages had Alzheimer's disease. This number included an estimated 5.1 million age 65 and older. It is believed that Fidget Quilts help soothe the nerves of Alzheimer's patients, giving them not only something comforting to do, but to touch.



Susan Roland, the assistant recreation director at Rutland Healthcare & Rehabilitation, which has received a delivery of quilts, said, "The quilts are appropriate for those who need them, but unfortunately, they are unable to express their thoughts on them. They do keep their hands busy. They sit around the table and feel the textures and fidget with the objects. Aside from the tactile quality there is a visual element as well. The quilts are beautiful for them to look at."

Carol Curtis of Proctor, one of the quilters, became involved with the project because her own mother had Alzheimer's. "I had never made a quilt, but my mother had Alzheimer's, so I felt like it was a worthwhile thing to do," she said. "It's a fellowship with the other people who do it

and a chance to visit and enjoy each other. To me it's a win-win."

She shared that her mother with Alzheimer's kept a toy Pound Puppy while a man at the same facility had a stuffed Dalmatian. "These were soothing for them and non-threatening to have something they could hold and communicate with if they wanted. It didn't put any stress on them to answer questions they may not have been able to answer otherwise. I think a Fidget Quilt works in a similar way," she said.

Phyllis Lanz of Proctor, who leads the church's Outreach Committee, noted, "We have various outreaches, both local and international, but it is nice to have one where we can get more involved because the quilts are going right down the street in our own communities. It's like Habitat for Humanity for quilters."

Kay Bergquist of Pittsford, who leads the church's Fidget Quilt effort, acknowledged that the local aspect of the project is indeed part of its appeal. "I'm a local quilter so when I think outreach I think quilting. When someone suggested the Fidget Quilts for Alzheimer's patients, it immediately seemed like the perfect project for us—they are small, easy to make, and they stay local."

Last spring, the women created 28 quilts, donating all of them. Then 18 more were donated just before Christmas. In addition to local facilities such as The Pines at Rutland, Haven Health Center Residential Care Home and Mountain View Center, the quilts have gone beyond the immediate area to places like Wake Robin in Shelburne, Vermont, where the mother of one of the quilters lives. The ladies presently have six or seven quilts ready to go to The Meadows.

"One of the ladies in the church suggested that autistic children would also benefit, so we donated a couple to families in our church who

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Betty Schneider, LEFT, and JoAnn Sullivan, RIGHT, work on quilts.

Last spring, the women created 28 quilts, donating all of them. Then 18 more were donated just before Christmas.

had autistic children or grandchildren and they have enjoyed them as well,” said Bergquist.

The quilters have received a fair amount of feedback. “The nursing homes were thrilled with them,” says Bergquist. “Two of the nursing homes have called and asked if there are more coming and the two families with autistic children have both been in contact with us to tell us how much their children have appreciated the quilts and used them.”

Fidget Quilts come with some basic guidelines for their creation. In addition to their small size, designed not to get tangled in wheelchairs, they are to be durable, washable, and not too precious. They are not to be made too beautiful for fear they would then be put away or stolen.

Texture also plays a crucial role in Fidget Quilt design. While most of

the quilts are cotton, some include corduroy, velvet, denim and fleece. All are colorful. The bright, often contrasting squares, are not chosen for their beauty, but their vividness. An array of equally engaging toys and embellishments cover the quilt, ranging from zippers, buttons and Velcro to scrunches, rubber bottle stoppers, Teenie Beanie Babies and other stuffed animals.

Part of the fun for the quilters is coming up with new items to adorn the quilts. These special items are what give the quilts their “fidget” power, providing their recipients with something to finger or caress. The search for ever-more innovative embellishments creates a friendly aura of competitive one-upmanship as each quilter lobbies to show her latest find. One woman boasts of using the nubby fabric from the bottom



of footed pajamas while another uses a sink stopper. The possibilities are apparently endless.

The nature of the quilts also allows the women to integrate fabrics and embellishments that are important to them as well. Barbara Lacy of Pittsford used one of her children's baby socks as a pocket used to hold a stuffed animal. When a young man in the community recently passed away, quilters included his name, "Clay," on some of the squares. Ellen Sutherland of Proctor recently incorporated a quilt block that she created 15 years earlier. Other women include pieces of curtain trim from their homes or scraps from their granddaughters' sundresses.

The quilters boast that Fidget Quilts are relatively quick and easy to make. "There's a learning curve, but they're easy. You don't have to

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Each quilt is special in
one way or another. They
are limited only by the
imagination of the creator.

—KAY BERGQUIST



be perfect,” said Curtis. “The fabrics can be varied. Some of them look like they go together and some don’t. In the end, it is what it is.”

And, on that note, the quilters sat me down in front of a simple, black 1950s sewing machine with the assurance that anyone can make a Fidget Quilt. Like me, a number of the women gathered at the church had only learned to quilt under Bergquist’s tutelage. The church darkens with the failing sun, but I work by the bright light cast by the sewing machine to first sew two squares together, then a row, and soon the front of a chaotically colored Fidget Quilt. I am invited to return when the group reconvenes to complete my effort and choose my embellishments.

I am not the only outsider issued such an invitation. “People come and go. A couple of ladies who participate aren’t members of the church. We’ve invited the whole community to come and be a part,” said Bergquist. “Each quilt is special in one way or another. They are limited only by the imagination of the creator. Each quilter brings a personal touch.”

Sutherland reiterated, “it’s nice that this is a project we can do together,” but like so many good deeds the true delight seems to come in the giving. “I was the lucky person, who got to take these to the nursing homes the first time,” Bergquist observed. “Now someone else gets to deliver them and receive those warm fuzzies.”

Kim J. Gifford is a writer, teacher, artist and photographer. She lives in Bethel, VT with her grumble of pugs (yes, that is indeed what a group of pugs is called) Alfie, Waffles and Amore. To view her work and hear their stories, visit www.pugsandpics.com.



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