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Communities Of Comfort: Quilts to Comfort the Families of America's Fallen in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars

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Abstract

Beginning in 2003, grassroots quiltmaking projects were founded in the United States in response to Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Marine Comfort Quilts, founded by Jan Lang, Operation Homefront Quilts, founded by Jessica Porter, and Home of the Brave Quilt Project, founded by Donald Beld, each endeavor to make and give memorial quilts to each family of America's fallen in these wars. Each project involves a community of volunteers scattered across the nation, many who have never met each other but who communicate through various communications technologies.

Oral history interviews were conducted with the founders of the three projects listed above and with other quiltmakers who are active within them in order to understand the meanings of making and giving quilts and the meanings of quilts as messengers of comfort and care from quiltmakers to grieving military families. Two primary sites of meaning were identified: 1) the internal motivations that inspired quiltmakers to begin and continue participation in a quiltmaking project; and 2) the textual, symbolic, and personal messages invested in and inherent within the quilts. These form a meaning-making process that effectively delivers the messages of comfort and care in spite of the social and geographical distance between quiltmakers and the military families.

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Marine Comfort Quilts

On a March evening in 2003, just a few days after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Jan Lang was with her new friend, Bren Pathenos, at a Support Our Troops rally in St. Louis, Missouri. The two women from the city's West County suburbs had recently met through their Marine sons, Alex Lang and Chris Pathenos, who had been deployed together in January within striking distance of Iraq. Fearing war and the worst, these women had quickly become best friends and mutual supporters. On that March evening at the rally, Jan received a call from her husband who was at home. The Marines had just left their house. Nine Marines from Alex's unit had been killed and Alex was missing in action. After twenty-four more hours of anquish, the rest of the news arrived. Alex and only two others had survived; eighteen had been killed in action.[1]

Jan's first thought, "Thank you, God!" was interrupted by a guilty question. "Why was her family so fortunate?" Guilt impelled Jan toward action that would give purpose to Alex's survival and the death of the others. She reflected, "I realized that God saved my son because he wanted someone to do something for these families to let them know that America appreciates the sacrifice that they have given in this war." Through a series of events she decided to make a "comfort quilt" for each of the eighteen families, using blocks she collected from women in an on-line support group for Marine moms, which she had discovered and joined after her near loss. Jan had never made a quilt before, but her resolve ignored her skill and Marine Comfort Quilts (MCQ) had its beginning.

By May 1, 2003 Jan and "the moms," as she calls them, decided to make a quilt for the family of every one of the 82 Marines who had been killed since the beginning of the invasion, and by August 2003 they agreed to include all branches of the Armed Forces in their burgeoning project of comfort. In July Jan launched a Yahoo Group—still in use today—through which all MCQ members may meet, divide the work, share project news and needs, and provide support to one another. The project is efficient and focused on its singular mission of comfort. Jan says that Marine Comfort Quilts

"...are stitches of love from those who want so badly to bring comfort, but don't know how to help." They are condolence cards you can wrap yourself in."

Bren Pathenos declared that before her friend Jan Lang got her involved in MCQ she didn't do crafts, so in the beginning she asked Jan if she could donate money or hire a seamstress to make her blocks. Jan, who is sometimes referred to as "Gunny," told her she had to make her own blocks. Bren found a way that works for her: she signs a memorial message on a plain square of camouflage cloth and signs it "Bren Pathenos, PMM," which stands for "Proud Marine Mom." Yet, even though her son, Chris, was fighting in Iraq, she admits that signing blocks didn't mean much to her. But almost four years into the war, on February 7, 2007, Bren's second Marine son, Matthew, was killed when a roadside bomb blew up the HUMVEE in which he was riding. To this point, she had made a block for each MCQ quilt. Bren doesn't remember doing so, but she sat down and wrote the square for the quilt that would be presented to her family. Bren says now that every block she makes is meaningful. She knows how it feels to lose a son.[2]

Sue Scheri of Spring Valley, Illinois, is Jan Lang's second in command. Even though the women live hours apart, Sue began coordinating Marine Comfort Quilts' quiltmaking for Army casualties, the branch that has experienced more losses than all the other branches combined. Jan coordinates the rest. In late 2003, when Sue's son came home and announced that he was deploying to Iraq with the Marines. Sue said, "I wanna say *panic* set in, I guess, as any mother would, sending her son to a war zone. I've always been the kind of person that when I'm nervous or upset or worried or concerned about something, I have to stay busy. So I had to find something to do; and in my searching on the Internet I found Marine Comfort Quilts, and it was like I connected." Sue continues, "Every quilt sends part of you … that says, 'I care and I will not forget.'" She knows that the families that receive quilts understand this message because they send her letters and cards, pictures of their fallen soldier, and sometimes they call her. Sue says they need to speak with someone who cares. "All the person wants is for you to talk about … [their fallen soldier or

Marine] and remember them and honor them and not just…ignore that they existed…. [T]hey … want to tell me how their son died. I've had them … go into great detail, and I'm like, "They have to do this." And I guess I can listen."[3]

Jan, Bren, and Sue and many others are continuing a long precedent of quiltmaking in times of war in American history. During the Civil War, women from the northern states made at least 250,000 quilts to supply bedding to the Union armies in the field and in military hospitals through the U. S. Sanitary Commission. Southern women carried on similar types of relief work for the Confederate Army, though with far fewer resources. Hundreds of red and white quilts were made as fundraisers for the American Red Cross during the First World War. And Mennonite women from Canada and the U.S. made and shipped thousands of quilts in a massive act of relief to the war-torn European continent following World War II. Women of varying political viewpoints made quilts as expressions of support and protest during the first Gulf War in the 1990s. Now, during the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, women and a few men have come together to make quilts for wounded soldiers and the families of those who died in the war zones.[4]

I found myself interested in what meanings the quilts and the quiltmaking have to contemporary wartime quiltmakers. So, I conducted an oral history project with eleven individuals—ten women and one man—each involved in one of three nationwide grassroots projects that make quilts for the families of American military personnel who were killed in the Iraq War and, in the case of one project, the Afghanistan War, too. Represented in this group of interviewees are the founders of each group—Jan Lang of Marine Comfort Quilts, Jessica Porter of Operation Homefront Quilts (OHQ), and Donald Beld of Home of the Brave Quilt Project (HBQP)—and eight others who are each deeply involved in one of the projects.[5]

Each of these quiltmaking projects has unique origins, quilt styles that are distinctive, and modes of organization and operation that are particular to the project. In spite of these differences, the textual analysis of interviewees' narratives reveals thematic similarities

regarding the meanings of the quilts and the quiltmaking. In particular, all are engaged in a meaningful process that spans from internal motivations to external actions and from immaterial concepts of identity and empathy to material expressions of comfort to the recipients. All of this originates within quiltmaking communities that use quilts as messengers of care and comfort in spite of geographic and relational distance between the quiltmakers and the grieving families.

Almost without exception, the interviewees found themselves impelled to begin making and giving quilts because--borrowing Home of the Brave Quilt Project founder Donald Beld's words--something "hit a nerve" within them. For example, some, like Jan Lang, described the process of making and giving quilts to comfort those who have suffered loss as a way to cope with her or his own loss, near loss, or fear of loss through reaching out with comfort to others who have lost. Others who opposed the war or were burdened with the consequences of war felt a strong need to do respond "do something." Women with sons were compelled by a shared maternal identity with women whose sons were killed. While using different language, each of the project founders stated a sense of calling to their project that doing the work adds purpose and meaning to her of his life.[6]

There is thematic similarity in how interviewee's personal and internal motivations work their way into the external social world in which the quilts were made and given. "Hitting a nerve," in the case of many of the interviewees, has social consequences. Specifically it elicits *social feelings* followed by *social actions*. "Knowing" is a word that represents this bridging from the internal to the external. Several interviewees made statements that connected their internal feelings to the feelings of the grieving family. Joanne Porter of OHQ, for example, said, "I really want them to know that their loved ones' sacrifices aren't forgotten. I want them to know that people realize what they've sacrificed, what their loved ones sacrificed. And to feel appreciated, and loved, supported. I really want them to feel that." Joanne makes it a habit to read several articles about each fallen service member and her/his family and then find a way to personalize

the family's quilt based on what she learns. She says, "It's a connection that they know that we actually know about them and it's not just taking the quilt and just sending it out."[7]

The quilts made by MCQ, OHQ, and HBQP are all meant to contain and bear messages. The interviewees used many words to speak about the messages they wanted to send to the families of the fallen: comfort, condolence, care, love, remembrance, support, their loved one's death was not in vain, gratitude for their sacrifice, and a celebration of the fallen's life. They all add up to a heartfelt message that is meant to heal the pain of loss. The messages are expressed in words that are inscribed on the quilt surfaces: names that represent a caring person, verses of scripture, poems, and personal thoughts. A photograph of the fallen one transferred to fabric and sewn to the quilt expresses communicates the value of the individual. The use of symbols and symbolic colors like red, white, and blue, American flags, eagles, and the Twin Towers associate the soldier's death with national values and virtues. Bound up in all of these things is the reality that the messages are social: they are extensions of the sender. As Sue Scheri says, "You send a piece of yourself with it."

The attribution of human-like qualities and actions to the quilts cause the quilts to have meanings as metaphors of persons. Boxes of quilts ready to ship to service member's families are spoken of figuratively as coffins containing the deceased. The experience of being wrapped in a quilt is likened to being hugged, either by the quiltmaker or the fallen service member. The quilts are vigilant messengers of the care of others to the receiving families. These things describe the function of the quilts as human proxies that connect, communicate, and move within the social space between quiltmakers' internal motivations and the pain, loss, pride, and honor experienced by American families whose daughter or son, partner, or parent died in war.

Characteristics of the Quiltmaking Community

While the quiltmaking occurring in MCQ, OHQ, and HBQP echoes the historical uses of quilts to provide comfort and care,

the configuration of the quiltmaking communities does not have precedent in American wartime quiltmaking. What is particularly unique is that many who participate have never met each other, have no prior social connections, and remain anonymous to each other throughout their participation. Nor is there known historical precedent for wartime quilts composed of components (blocks) collected from many individuals largely unknown to each other who are scattered over a large geographic area. These factors suggest that quilts are objects that meaningfully bring unknown persons together in a community. Jan Lang illustrated this reality in her comments to MCQ's Yahoo Group:

> I think of all of you as my friends, part of my extended family. When I first started Marine Comfort Quilts I never thought beyond giving back to the families. I never dreamed of the personal gains of friendship and love I would receive from all of you. You all are a great sense of comfort to me in more ways then you will ever know, thank you all for being here not only for the families but as my friends. I hope that some day we can all meet face to face and share our friendship more.[8]

A factor that has greatly enabled volunteers to participate in these national quiltmaking projects is that participation is accessible to almost any person, anywhere, regardless of sewing or quiltmaking skill. All three projects chose quilt designs requiring little or no sewing skill, which still allow individual expression. MCQ's quilts are the simplest, with size of block being the only firm requirement a volunteer must honor. A volunteer may participate without sewing, simply by writing a few encouraging works and her/his name on a square of plain cloth. In each of the projects there are non-quiltmaking tasks that allow participation of those who have other skills.

The Internet enables the formation of these quiltmaking communities. Each project passively recruits volunteers through their websites and these sites facilitate subsequent contact with those who become involved. Communication among participants occurs quickly, efficiently, and at very low cost via e-mail or on-line discussion forums. These communities meet daily to share information on the

progress of the project and keep track of and encourage one another. Don Beld expresses the magnitude of the Internet's enablement of HBQP as follows: "I don't think it would exist without the Internet…. Individual [quilt] guilds and individual quilters throughout the country would be doing as they've done for hundreds of years, but there wouldn't be any organized event like this…. The Internet has revolutionized our ability to coordinate something like this on a national scale."

By way of comparison to large-scale historic wartime quiltmaking, the efforts of women's aid organizations in the North and South during the Civil War were built up from a foundation of family and community organizations that fed into regional and national organizational structures. In contrast, electronic communication enables individual quiltmakers today to participate directly with the state or national levels of each project without the necessity of a local community affiliation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to reveal a personal aspect of my methodology in this research. Elizabeth Barber, in *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*, describes a pivotal discovery she made in her research of a Late Bronze Age Celtic textile by attempting to weave a reproduction of it. Her admonition to textile researchers was to not neglect participation as a valuable research method that allows the researcher to get "inside" the mind of the one who created the artifact that is being examined. Reluctantly I followed Barber's admonition and became a participant in MCQ and HBQP. I am a quiltmaker hobbyist, so I sewed, signed, and sent a few blocks to each person who had been kind enough to participate in the interviews. At first it was done to fulfill an obligation I felt to the research. Unlike the interviewees, nothing had hit a nerve with me, yet. I awoke one morning to the announcement of the funeral services of Lt. Kevin Gaspers, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln alumnus who had been killed in Iraq. The next morning I awoke to hear a news report of his funeral and learned more about his family and the things for which he

was remembered and honored. A few days later I read in *The Daily Nebraskan* an account of a memorial service held on campus for Lt. Gaspers, again learning of his honorable qualities and the respect his fellow soldiers accorded him. I began to feel that in his death something valuable was taken from my world. Something had hit a nerve with me and I felt I needed to do something. I determined to sew and sign a block for Lt. Gaspers' quilt, and I did.[9]

I also made a block for the Pathenos family's quilt. I had not met Matthew, but I interviewed his mother six weeks after his death. Through her story I came to understand the power of "knowing" the families that was described to me by interviewees. I designed the block to reflect what I knew of the family so that it might be more meaningful to them; and I hoped it would communicate the care and comfort I couldn't find words to express.

These blocks I made are now sewn permanently next to blocks made by people I have never met, will never meet, and whose names I will never know, but who participate with me in a community of caring, who stand side by side in open-hearted proxy through our signatures on the ranks of blocks in the quilt, ready to wrap the grieving ones in folds of comfort.

Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all references to and quotations of Jan Lang may be found in {Lang, 2007 #462}.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all references to and quotations of Bren Pathenos may be found in {Pathenos, 2007 #464}.

3 Unless otherwise noted, all references to and quotations of Sue Scheri may be found in {Scheri, 2007 #463@2}.

4 See {Gunn, 1994 #203}, {Rowley, 1983 #199}, {Armstrong, 1992 #155}.

5 The names of those interviewed are Jan Lang, Sue Scheri, and Bren Pathenos of Marine Comfort Quilts; Jessica Porter, Joanne Porter, and Ellen Saccoia-Smith of Operation Homefront Quilts; and Donald Beld, Barbara Shillinger, Beverly Macbeth, Carol Smith, and Sandi Carstensen of Home of the Brave Quilt Project. Many of these interviews will be archived in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries archives and special collections.

6 Unless otherwise noted, all references to and quotations of Donald Beld may be found in {Beld, 2007 #457} and {Beld, 2007 #458}.

7 Unless otherwise noted, all references to and quotations of Joanne Porter may be found in Porter, Interview, 23 April 2007, 21.

8 Jan Lang, "Sharing My Thoughts," Marine Comfort Quilts Digest Number 2095, e-mail to author, 12 April 2008.

9 Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 17-23.