

The “Crochet Program” at Snyder County Prison Gives Warmth to Those in Need

“It’s amazing what a crochet hook and some yarn can do,” stated Snyder County Commissioner, Malcolm Derk, at a Joint Legislative Forum. He wasn’t talking about an art event or a group of church ladies crocheting items for a Christmas Bazaar. He was referring to a new crochet program at the Snyder County Prison.



This inmate was anxious to show us an afghan that took hours of work.

A New Program

It all started in the spring of 2009. The Snyder County Commissioners paid a fact-finding visit to the Pike County Prison. They were looking for cost-saving rehabilitation programs to integrate into the daily lives of the prisoners at the Snyder County Prison.

In the past, an elderly man, Jacob Mast, taught a popular rug hooking class to some of the male inmates at the Snyder County Prison. Unfortunately Mr.Mast’s health forced him to stop teaching the class. In an attempt to replace the rug hooking program, the institution tried to find volunteers to teach arts and crafts. A few of the volunteers never showed up and those that did felt the environment was too much for them and the visits stopped. There was definitely a need for a new rehabilitation program at the prison.

The trip to Pike County provided the commissioners with information for a program that would help restore a feeling of self-worth to the prisoners at a minimal cost. The “Crochet Program” was introduced in August of 2009.

Getting Started

With a few crochet hooks and some yarn donated by various community organizations, the program was introduced to the women at the correctional facility. At that time the dormitory housed twenty 20 women. The warden explained they were starting a new crochet program and were looking for an outside volunteer to teach the art of crocheting.

One of the inmates said, “You don’t have to look for anyone. I know how to crochet and I’ll teach the others.”

The warden laid down the ground rules: (1) The program was a volunteer program and (2) it was a privilege that could be taken away if any of the rules were broken. Of the 20 women, 18 volunteered. The other two felt they couldn’t do the intricate stitches or didn’t have the patience to learn.

The population of the women’s dorm constantly changes as prisoners are released and new prisoners arrive, but the Crochet Program has continued as a vibrant recreational activity.



Blankets waiting for pick-up by a member of the Evangelical Hospital Auxiliary.

When a new prisoner enters the system she is told of the crochet program. Some inmates are eager to learn to crochet immediately. Others are hesitant, but after a time, they begin to take an interest in the items being made and want to join. However, there are a few who have shown no interest at all.

A Feeling of Accomplishment

During one of my visits to the prison, the inmates expressed how much they liked the program because it helps them pass the time. Some of the women crochet whenever they are not busy doing other jobs. They also expressed a feeling of accomplishment when they contribute handiwork that will add cozy comfort to newborns and the elderly. The very act of crocheting contributes to the prisoners' healing process as they count their stitches and work their yarn into beautiful items that will be used by people they will never know. The social contact among the inmates is positive as the women sit together, crochet, talk, and help each other learn new stitches and patterns.



Proudly displaying her large afghan, this prisoner likes knowing her work will help keep babies and the elderly warm.

“I enjoy crocheting and it’s my way to give back to the community,” stated one inmate.

“My grandmother taught me how to crochet and I think of her when I work,” said another young woman.

Fortunately, requests for their beautiful work exceed their ability to produce it. Knowing there is always someone who will appreciate and need their handiwork keeps them motivated.

Involving the Community

The crocheted items are given to several community organizations. Through this program and other organizations donating crocheted items, the Lewisburg Evangelical Hospital

Auxiliary provided a new hand-made blanket as a “going home” gift for every baby during the months of November through May. The Auxiliary’s goal is to provide a hand-made blanket for



A recent donation to the Evangelical Hospital Family Place. Shown left to right are: Krista McNalley, Unit Assistant; Jeanette Williams, President of the Auxiliary to Evangelical Hospital; Jennifer Leister, Director of Maternal Child Services; Connie Heyman, Auxiliary Member and leader of the Baby Blanket Project.

every baby that leaves the hospital. Between 500 and 600 babies are born at Evangelical Hospital each year so there will always be a need for these gifts that are treasured by the new mothers.

Lap blankets are also crocheted for guests at GraysonView Assisted Living Center and The Manor at Penn Village, in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. The residents are delighted with the colorful and warm lap blankets that have been donated by the inmates. On March 19, 2011, National Quilting Day, Tara Bassler, the recreational director at GraysonView, held a Bingo party. Each winner received a crocheted lap blanket donated by one of the prison inmates.



These lovely ladies, residents of the Grayson View Assisted Living Center, were more than happy to pose with their colorful lap robes. They enjoy looking at the different colors and wouldn't be without them during the cold winter days. From left to right: Isabelle Bailey and Jean Rathfon.

In addition to the goal of “a blanket for every baby” and fulfilling the needs of the nursing homes, the program has expanded to include other organizations within the community. Local service groups, fire companies, and other organizations have donated yarn to the prison. In return

they receive afghans and other crocheted items for their fund-raising events. For example, blankets crocheted by the prisoners were donated to Ashley's Auction, a fund-raising event sponsored by Geisinger Hospital's Children's Miracle Network organization.

Benefits for the Prison and the Prisoners

An old proverb states, "The Devil finds work for idle hands to do." Evidently that is true. Before the program started there were six to eight incidents of verbal or physical confrontations among women inmates each month.

Consequently, the opposite is true for busy hands. In the many months since the program started there have been no incidents of verbal or physical conflict between any of the women inmates. This amazing statistic has taught the County Prison Board that a person who is kept occupied doing something they enjoy and of which they can be proud, adds to their self-worth. In addition they can continue this skill when they are released.

To maintain the program residents of the community contribute yarn for the project. The Evangelical Community Hospital Auxiliary, the Snyder County Republican Women, the families of patients at the nursing homes and various organizations holding fund raising events are among those who donate the yarn.

Recently the Snyder County Arts Council has taken an interest in getting information about the program to the public. The council has a display highlighting the Prison Crochet Program in the window of Emma's Food for Life in Selinsgrove and is asking for donations of yarn, crochet hooks, and instruction books.

The Men Join the Program

In December, 2010, the men at the prison surprised the warden and asked to become part of the program. It was immediately introduced to the male inmates living in the dorms. Currently six male inmates are crocheting beautiful baby blankets. On my visit to the prison I was shown a collection of blankets the men recently crocheted. The meticulous workmanship included a variety of intricate patterns.



This intricate design was crocheted by a male prisoner. When asked how he made such a beautiful pattern, he replied, "I read the directions."

The goal is to continue and expand the volunteer crochet program with both the male and female population. As public interest and donations grow, so will the requests for crocheted items multiply. Going forward, it is anticipated that when new and current prisoners see how the program enhances the lives of their fellow inmates they will also give it a try.

Saving Money

The cost for this program is minimal if not non-existent. Most of the yarn and crochet hooks are donated. The county saw an 80% (eighty percent) reduction in healthcare costs for the female population from August 2009 through July 2010, the first year of this program. These savings continue because there have been no incidents between the women since the program began. Therefore the prison does not need the additional services of a doctor or added ambulance/hospital costs. The prison has also saved overtime dollars paid to staff. Every time a confrontation occurred, the inmates were separated and extra personnel was needed to monitor them, adding additional hours to the prison staff's work week.

When the program is introduced to the community at various meetings of civic organizations as well as individual to individual, the response is overwhelming. It gives the residents a chance to help in the rehabilitation of those who have gone astray; thus with great enthusiasm, the donations continue to grow.

If you would like to donate yarn, patterns or crochet hooks to the crochet program you can contact the Snyder County Court House at gwenjones@snydercounty.org. or call 570-837-4274 and leave a message. We will return your call as soon as possible.



The three blankets shown are the work of the male prisoners. One prisoner was pleased knowing his large crib blanket will be used to keep an infant warm for many years.

