

Middletown Groups Band Together in Blanket Project

By Robin Maliszewskyj

Middletown High School (MHS) science teacher Sharon Steger is an organizer. And she has the ability to bring multiple groups together for the greater good. For a number of years, Sharon has enlisted the help of some of her students in a project to create hand-tied fleece blankets for those who need them.

She said, "Students in my science classes (Bio, Environmental, Physics of Earth and Space), as well as those assigned to the Knight Quest advisement block, volunteered. They will receive service-learning hours for making the blankets."

Sharon begins each year after Thanksgiving, and distributes the blankets before Christmas. This year, her group made 48 blankets.

One student who helped was ninth-grader Lilian Phillips, who said, "I made three blankets. I liked that I was helping someone, especially during the pandemic when so many people need help."

Tenth-grader Ryan Tipsord said, "I liked the fact that we could do this easy project, and it would help someone who didn't have access to items to keep them warm."

Ninth-grader Maurlea Long made two blankets. She said when she heard about the project, "Right away, I was excited to get

involved with it. I enjoyed having a craft project to do while we were stuck at home."

Ninth-grader Marc Whiteley made both a blanket and some cards. He said, "What I liked about this project is that I learned something new, while helping someone less fortunate, making them something that would last."

Natalie Fox, a tenth-grader who made one child and one adult blanket, said, "I have made these blankets before with my Girl Scout troop, and I think it is a very beneficial experience."



One of the beneficiaries of Sharon's efforts is a local program called Marks Backpacks (www.marksbackpacks.wixsite.com/helpthehomeless), which was founded in 2015 by Corrine Wilkinson, a 2013 MHS graduate. With the help of her family, Corri compiles backpacks with necessities such as toiletries and warm clothing, and personally distributes them to homeless individuals while driving around Washington, DC. Marks Backpacks distributes 30-40 bags annually.

Corri said, "Mrs. Steger has been a tremendous help in terms of connecting us with people who would be interested in donating and engaging her classroom in these activities, as well."

Marks Backpacks gave a presentation to Sharon's students, providing information on what contributes to homelessness. This year, with the challenges of Covid, Marks Backpacks has used new avenues, such as Facebook Marketplace and neighborhood internet pages, to get the word out and collect donations.

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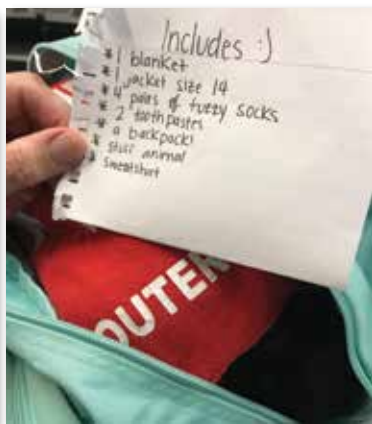
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A number of organizations and individuals have contributed to the project through monetary donations or donated items: St Mark's Lutheran Church, Fitzsimmons Group of RBC Wealth Management, C. Basil Grossnickle Insurance Agency, Middletown and Myersville Lions Clubs, Stauffer Funeral Home, Christy Kehlbeck, Marda Blain, and the Bryce Marcus Whiteley family.

Kaye Derr made and donated masks. She said, "I made about 30 for Sharon, but over the course of the pandemic, I've made over 900. Recently retired from the post office in Middletown, I had the time and plenty of fabric, so I was more than happy to help her and the community."

Another recipient of blankets was Middletown Valley People Helping People (MVPHP). President Mary Straits, said, "Often our mission is to distribute goods to people and families in need in our area."

This mission manifests itself in a variety of ways, including a school supply drive in August and the Adopt a Family for the Holidays project. The blankets, which Mary said numbered about 30 total over the past two years, were distributed to children through the Adopt a Family project, the Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, and the Kyleigh Cares if You're Cold Blanket Drive ("KCC Blanket Drive" on Facebook).

KCC is currently run by Middletown Middle School eighth-grader Kyleigh Gray, who took over the program two years ago from her cousin, Kayla Jackson in New Jersey.

"She was going off to college and was looking for someone to continue it, so I said I would," Kyleigh said.

Kyleigh places collection boxes in various locations, and with the help of her grandfather John King, also promotes her blanket drive as part of the fire company's mega bingo event.

Kyleigh collects about 400 blankets annually and gives them to dialysis centers and the Frederick Rescue Mission. She also gives baby blankets to the FMH NICU.

Sharon's project also provided blankets to the Wolfsville Food Pantry. Students involved said they enjoyed being a part of it.

"I got happiness and joy out of knowing that I was helping others," Maurlea said.

Ryan said, "I got the satisfaction of knowing that the thing I made could help someone in need."

"I enjoy helping others, and making these blankets was a good way to do that. I like that I was able to help those not as fortunate, especially during this difficult time," Natalie said.

Marc said working on the blanket project gave him "a sense of awareness for what's around me. It also helped to show me what I can do to help people in my community."

Corri said Marks Backpacks has received great feedback on the blankets from Sharon's project. She said, "Individuals who have received these blankets state that they are good for being outdoors, and dry out quickly, which is a crucial aspect when living outdoors. The blankets we receive from her have the potential to do far more good for the recipient than some alternatives that we have to offer."

Mary summed it up with, "These blankets provided the recipients with a warm cozy reminder that others care about them."

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