

# Operation Warm Hearts spins a success story in the community



By **Bonnie Kohout** Community Member

By Bonnie R. Kohout, Director of Marketing  
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It took just a thread of an idea to create a voluntary knitting-crocheting group that would meet monthly at King-Bruwaert House in Burr Ridge. After spinning an open invitation to area residents back in May, Burr Ridge residents Agnes Donlon and Carol Hanson were hopeful the group would materialize.

Indeed it did – and well beyond any early expectations. During the first meeting, more than a dozen enthusiastic and talented ladies turned out to officially launch the group that was aptly named, Operation Warm Hearts. The intention was to encourage friendships and support mutual interests and skills in knitting, crocheting and making warm clothing items for local charities.

“I was very excited about the initial response and that people were so eager to participate,” Donlon said. “It was self-propelled right from the beginning. Those who joined our group enjoyed the camaraderie, yet worked independently on their projects. Within the first few meetings, we began to see an outpouring of labor and love.”

As the months passed, the Operation Warm Hearts circle grew to more than 35 members. Expertise was shared at every meeting and the bounty of beautiful, hand-made items was showcased each month for all to see and appreciate.

“We’ve been learning from each other,” Donlon said. “Whenever questions about stitches or patterns arise, there’s always someone in the group who has an answer. We exchange patterns and talk about our experiences. There’s great knowledge among our members that they’re very willing to impart.”

Members of Operation Warm Hearts share a variety of stories about how and where they acquired their skills. Lillemor Wennes of Burr Ridge, born and raised in Sweden, learned to knit, crochet, sew and excel at embroidery work while in grade school. A talented artist and painter, Wennes noted that most of the children she knew were taught these valuable skills in Swedish schools.

“We just learned it and didn’t think twice about it,” she said. “We also learned to sew most of our clothes.”

Elizabeth Smidt reveals her knitting interests started with the London military. While her brother was serving in the British Army, Smidt responded to a call for knitted hats and scarves needed by the troops.

Eventually she met and married an American serviceman and moved to the United States where her family followed her. She has continued to knit items throughout the years and most recently dedicated her talents to making hats, scarves and booties for a Native American reservation. A volunteer at King-Bruwaert House, she heard about Operation Warm Hearts and decided to join the group.

At least two women taught themselves how to knit by learning to make argyle socks. Jane Foster of Burr Ridge was attending Lyons Township High School when she picked up a knitting book and studied the patterns to make socks. She advanced to more elaborate skills, eventually teaching herself to knit sweaters and caps.

“When I watched TV, I would knit for hours.” she said.

Carol Hanson also started knitting argyle socks while in nursing school, acquiring her skills from her sister-in-law, Leila Ronning. The two were studying to be nurses while sharing a close friendship and an interest in knitting.

“We didn’t have any formal lessons,” Hanson said. “I also spent some time doing cross-stitch work. I have always liked to do handiwork.”

Last fall, Operations Warm Hearts members were asked to submit the names of charities they would like support with their donations. Based on the suggestions, seven agencies were selected: Pillars – Constance Morris House; Westmont Convalescent Home; Anne M. Jeans Elementary School; Evangelical Child & Family Agency; Loyola Hospital-infants; The Cradle in Evanston; and Harbor Light Hospice.

By mid-November, members had created 311 hats, gloves, mittens, scarves, blankets, lap robes, toys and tiny items for premature (preemie) babies. Calls to the agencies confirmed a need for the items that were available.

Because many bags and boxes of yarn, knitting needles, patterns, books and even unfinished projects had been donated to the group from local residents and businesses, there was interest in hosting an Open House to display all the stunning pieces that had been created. Members of the community, family and friends were invited to attend the Open House on Nov. 23 that attracted a steady stream of guests who marveled at the quantity of items displayed.

“We were pleased that so many people came out to support our efforts,” Hanson said. “Quite a few people actually wanted to purchase our hand-made items. It was a compliment to the quality of the goods that our group had made.”

Following the Open House, representatives of the seven agencies stopped by to pick up the donations. Many expressed joy and gratitude that their agencies had been selected for the contributions. All were planning to use the items immediately.

In a thank you letter written to the group, staff from Harbor Light Hospice wrote, “Thanks so much for taking the time to crochet and donate your lovely lap blankets for Harbor Light Hospice patients. Each person who receives a blanket will treasure your gift.”

Yet another touching response came from officials at Anne M. Jeans Elementary School in Burr Ridge who sent the group pictures featuring children wearing the hats, scarves, mittens and gloves that were made for them. “How cute they looked in the pictures,” Hanson said. “What a wonderful way to let us know the donations were being used by the children.”

To celebrate the success of Operation Warm Hearts, Hanson and Donlon recently hosted a holiday luncheon for members. Amid smiles, conversations and laughter, the ladies exchanged stories about their lives and experiences, all representing a colorful human tapestry of kindness and good will.

“Operation Warm Hearts has really been wonderful for us all,” Donlon said. “It really warms our hearts to be able to help others.”

The next regular meeting of Operation Warm Hearts takes place at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 8, in The Woods Inn at King-Bruwaert House. For more information, call Donlon at (630) 323-6378; or Hanson at (630) 323-7345.

