

York Region Quilters guild mark special day with Quilts of Valour

More than 30 members of the York Region Quilters Guild recently converged on the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion to mark National Sew Day.

But it was more than just a meeting of those who share a love for the traditional craft; it was a celebration of those who have served King, Queen & Country as the Guild presented Quilts of Valour to members of the Canadian Forces.

"National Sew Day has become a cherished tradition for the Region of York Quilters Guild, and it is a wonderful reminder of the joy that comes from creating something beautiful and meaningful together," said Michael Babineau who, along with his wife, Naomi, are stalwart Guild volunteers.

The day was made extra meaningful for Guild members with the presentation of three Quilts of Valour.

Among the recipients were Captain Erika Palakovic, who first enlisted in the Canadian Forces in 2008, serving in Latvia; to Corporal (Ret'd) Davis Elson, who saw deployment in Cyprus and twice to Bosnia, and currently serves as a member of Peel Regional Police; and Captain Stephen Lloyd, a member of the Queen's York Rangers, who has served in Operation Palladium.

The Guild has been a long-time supporter of the Quilts of Valor initiative, but it was a rare opportunity for those who have contributed to the project to see their quilts presented to their ultimate recipients, which serve as a warm hug for those who have served the country.

The Quilts of Valour program was founded in 2006 by Lezley Zwaal, an Edmonton quilter, who presented hand-made cozy works of art to three Canadian Armed Forces members who were recovering in Alberta from injuries sustained in the line of duty in Afghanistan.

It was, they say, her own way to "give some comfort" to the men and women who served, and Zwaal's efforts inspired others across the country to follow her lead.

The organization is led today by Lisa Compton, who was a Nursing Officer in Kandahar.

"I will truly never be able to put into words how much it meant to have these beautiful quilts from home to tuck around our injured Canadian soldiers as they began their journey back to their loved ones," she says. "Many years later, as part of my PTSD healing journey, I began quilting. It helped with my healing, and making quilts for my brothers and sisters in arms gave me purpose. I felt connected both to my fellow veterans and to many amazing QOVC volunteers. In 2016, I received my Quilt of Valour and felt first-hand the healing and comfort it provides.

"The quilt recipients, their loved ones and the volunteers that I have met during my time with quilts of valour has motivated me to give as much as I can to QOVC. It is a privilege to be a part of a team of quilters and volunteers who truly care about our ill and injured veterans and want to recognize them for their service and sacrifice to Canada."

These are sentiments shared locally by Michael and Naomi.

"The mandate was to present 20,000 quilts by the year 2020 - and only 14 years (since the group was founded) and starting from scratch, that's a big jump," says Michael. "COVID got in the way and we didn't make [the goal] but today we have given over 25,000 quilts to deserving veterans from World War 2, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and all the peacekeeping missions are now included, which, of course, are endless, Canada being such a peace-loving country."

While Naomi, by Michael's admission, is the handy one with the needle in the family, he contributes to the Guild's efforts as a

formal quilt Presenter. In doing so, he takes pride in meeting current and retired personnel and their families in order to express thanks.

One such notable to receive a quilt is the late Sergeant Graham Clapp, the last surviving member of the Devil's Brigade.

?The most common thing that gets said to me by the veterans is, 'I don't really deserve it,' and that I should give it to someone else, to which I have to make sure they know they deserve it. As overwhelming as it is for them, it is just as overwhelming for me. I have met so many unbelievable people by presenting these quilts.?

For more information on the York Region's Quilters Guild, including how to become involved, visit www.regionofyorkquiltersguild.ca. For more on the Quilts of Valour program, head over to www.quiltsofvalour.ca.

By Brock Weir