

A Quilt and a Tribute

Rita Swagerty puts her talent to work saluting our troops

By Jeanie Senior

For the past couple of months, Rita Swagerty of White Salmon has not gone anywhere without a quilt. And an indelible-ink pen.

The reason: She's making a series of star quilts in red, white and blue that pay tribute to the members, past and present, of the five branches of the United States military. Each quilt features 20 stars pieced in red, white and blue fabric, set against a white background with plenty of room for signatures and messages.

The first finished quilt now is hanging at the Oregon Veterans Home in The Dalles. A second completed quilt still is at her home, waiting for bureaucratic approval before she sends it to Madigan Army Medical Center, the military hospital at Fort Lewis near Tacoma.

Rita is starting a third quilt to hang in the Veterans Affairs hospital in Roseburg, Oregon.

Dozens of notes of appreciation, love and solidarity are displayed on the Madigan quilt.

"Thank you for your service to the USA," says one note.

Jeff and Donnie Williams noted they are parents of Navy and Air Force sons. Pat Durban wrote that she is the daughter of a World War II veteran.

Some veterans included information about their time in the military.

"U.S. Army Recon 9th Inf Div Vietnam 68-69," Joseph Bodolay wrote.

"Cliff McClure 101st Airborne Recon," another autograph says.

Rita's partner, Boyd Davis, a



Rita Swagerty shows the Madigan Quilt, which drew dozens of notes of appreciation from servicemen and women.

retired chief warrant officer in the U.S. Coast Guard, included his dates of service—1949 to 1975—when he signed the Madigan quilt on a square near her name.

Rita started on the first of the tribute quilts last autumn.

"I was trying to think of something that I could do for our military men and women who are in Iraq on active duty, but not just the ones over there, all the active duty and the ones who are hurt and separated," she says.

The need to acknowledge our country's soldiers and sailors was heightened by Rita's visit a few years ago to the war memorials in Washington, D.C. and Virginia.

She says it's not possible to stand in the middle of Arlington National Cemetery and be unmoved by the acres of white crosses.

"As I turned in a complete circle the tears came, as I realized they represented the men and women who had served our great country

for my freedom," she wrote later.

More tears followed when she visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the statue depicting the flag raising on Iwo Jima.

"When I think about all of the men and women who have served in our armed forces, from before the time we gained our independence and since then, it all adds up to my freedom," Rita says. "I can say thank you to all those I meet and frequently do just that."

But she says the quilts "may be a way to say thank you to so many I never come in contact with. I made this wall hanging so I could include others who want to do the same."

Rita took the Madigan quilt to work at the Big River Diner, where she is a waitress.

"I put it up on a table and people asked about it, so I would explain," she says.

She also carried the quilt to the Elks and Eagles lodges, to Les Schwab in Hood River, and to other

businesses in Bingen and White Salmon.

A restaurant owner told Rita his two nieces are serving in Iraq.

“I told him, when you hear from them, do me a favor, please, and tell them thank you for me,” Rita says. “The kind of people I’ve met, it’s really been a blessing for me to do this.”

Wherever the quilts are hung, “I just hope that it warms their heart,” she adds.

At Christmas time, Rita wrapped up a finished quilt and took it with her for her grown children when they celebrated the holiday together in Eugene.

“I always give them something I make,” she says. “This year, I told them, is the year that what I give to you I will be giving to others. They opened it up and just loved it. They thought it was the greatest thing. They were very proud.”

All five of her children have signed the quilts.

Rita was born in Oklahoma and raised in Port Angeles and the Willamette Valley. She has lived in White Salmon since 2000. She started quilting more than two years ago.

“It’s become my favorite pastime,” she says. “Now I’ve gone on to wall hangings.”

Her meticulously neat quilting operation is set up at one end of their living room. Boyd, a chess player, marvels at the precise and detailed work her quilting involves. He is her helper and supporter.

Rita has worked evenings as a waitress at the diner since March.

“I’m the old grandmother there,” jokes Rita, who will be 68 in June. “I relate to the seniors. People at work ask how old I am and I say, almost 70. I love my job, I love to work, I love people.”

“Honey, I’ve worked off and on since I was 16 years old, at a lot of different things. But I always go back to waiting tables. It’s just fun to get people to smile. How can you not smile when somebody’s smiling at you?” ■



Above, Rita at work. Below, a sample of the many notes of appreciation from the troops about Rita’s quilt.

