

Sojourn Bears help comfort grownup cancer patients

BY LAURA COVIM
STAFF WRITER

More than 800 huggable, handmade teddy bears have found their way into the arms of area cancer patients thanks to Joyce Weigel of Farmington.

Weigel signed on as a volunteer with Sojourn Bears Inc., a nonprofit organization based in Treasure Island, Fla., about two years ago.

But she first learned of the organization during her own battle with cancer. Shortly after she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995, Weigel received a Sojourn Bear from her sister-in-law, who also volunteers for the organization.

The bears are given to cancer patients as a symbol of support and understanding - and it was a symbol Weigel found very helpful during difficult times.

So, after beating the cancer, Weigel joined the organization's crusade to make cancer more bear-able for others.

"I can relate to people when they say they're losing weight, or that everything tastes metallic," she said. "I've been there, I've walked that road."

AIMS TO PLEASE
Weigel takes individual requests for the bears, and when possible she likes to tailor each to the recipient's tastes.

"I like to ask what colors they like," she said, "and what their interests are. They can request a boy or a girl bear if they'd like, too."

In addition to the individual requests she gets, Weigel regularly drops off bears for distribution at the Providence Hospital oncology centers in Novi and Southfield, where she once received cancer treatment.

Recipients are encouraged to hug their bears often and use them as a reminder that others know what they're going through.

"Sometimes when I'm at the oncology center people will walk in with their bears," she said. "And I often get thank-you



Joyce Weigel sews the back closed on one of her bears.

notes from people who say they sleep with their bears."

That type of response, she said, makes it all worth it.

Although she has made a few special exceptions, Weigel says the bears are for adults, not children.

They're not made of the non-flammable materials often used in children's toys, and the bears may also have small buttons or other objects that may pose a choking hazard to young children.

Additionally, she said, adults are often forgotten when they become ill.

"There are so many things for children," she said. "People



Joyce Weigel's bears tend to take over the house.

seem to think adults are supposed to be the big person that can handle things all alone. They need support, too."

GREAT RESPONSE

Weigel said the response to the bears and her efforts in making them has been very positive.

"People are touched by a stranger doing something nice for them," she said.

"I always get such a warm reaction. I'm known as the 'bear lady' now."

The bears sometimes seem to take over her home, filling the sewing room and spilling over into the extra bedrooms. But she wouldn't have it any other way.

"I didn't like being told I had cancer," she said, "but it started me on a ministry I never would have found otherwise. I never would have started making the bears if I hadn't had cancer."

In fact, it was a personal battle with cancer that first got the organization going in 1995.

Undergoing treatment for breast cancer, Jan Burlew of Treasure Island, Fla., turned to her stuffed bears for comfort.

"My teddy bear collection was an inspiration during those times," she said. "They made me smile and helped me get through the days."

Burlew's husband unknow-



Joyce Weigel makes teddy bears from donated material. Her daughter brought back fabric from a trip to Spain. Joyce fashioned it into a spanish-themed bear.

ingly got the collection started when he gave her a teddy bear on their first Valentine's Day together. Over the years, she collected more than 50 of the cuddly bears to hug.

After beating cancer, she said, she was inspired to help others find comfort and emo-

tional support during a frightening time. It was her way, she said, of making a difference in the world.

So with the help of a friend who conceived the name Sojourn Bears, the project was under way. A card accompany-

HOW TO DONATE

Sojourn Bears Inc. depends on supporters to keep the teddy bears coming. Help by donating:

- previously unused fabrics
- sewing notions (lace, buttons, elastic, etc.)
- polyester fiber fill
- cash, which is used to purchase bear eyes, noses and name tags.

For more information contact Joyce Weigel at (248) 473-1398. If you are interested in starting your own chapter, contact Jan Burlew at (727) 481-9782.

name: "To sojourn is to stay for a time or reside temporarily," it says. "It's our hope and prayer that your time with cancer is a short sojourn with a happy, fruitful ending."

"People get a lot of comfort from the bears," she said, "and some even attribute their recovery and say they couldn't have done it without their bear."

Sadly, not everyone recovers from cancer.

"I really knew they were making a difference when I heard that people were having the bear buried with them," she said.

"Others leave them to the family and they become a sentimental remembrance."

Burlew now has about 40 chapters of Sojourn Bears across the country, with 30,000 bears distributed to cancer patients since 1995.

She plans to continue the project, she said, "until there's no more cancer."

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