Wee Care Service Project

Many SAGA chapters sew and smock simple bishop-style gowns and donate them to local hospitals to clothe babies who die at birth or shortly after. Some chapters also donate smocked bonnets for premature infants.

The idea for the Wee Care gowns came in 1986, from Rose Trellis Smocking Guild in Portland, Oregon. Members Chris Owings and Nancy Newell were looking for a distinctive public service project for chapter members that could be made quickly, would require inexpensive materials, and would teach beginners new techniques, yet be worth the time of more experienced members. Owings, a registered nurse and childbirth educator, and Newell, a pattern designer, was deemed to discover the need for these gowns and determine a way to fill that need.

It did not take long for the Wee Care service program to be adopted by SAGA chapters across the United States, Canada, and Australia. It has even expanded further with chapters providing gowns to be used in hospital neo-natal units for preemie babies that survive and must have an extended hospital stay. Often, hospitals request these gowns in prints and brighter colors and use them on a daily basis.

For a parent holding a dying baby, sorrow is often overwhelming. Life isn't supposed to end before it has really had a chance to begin. In those moments, even the strongest have their faith tested. What comfort there is often comes in simple acts – an arm wrapped around grieving shoulders, shared tears, the gentle touch of a hand.

At many hospitals across the country, comfort also comes in the form of small gowns lovingly hand-smocked by members of local smocking guilds. A social worker at one hospital stated, "We use them almost exclusively for babies that have died or are going to die. We are able to cover up a lot of the medical equipment with the gowns so that the parents get to see their baby looking great. Sometimes, the parents keep the gowns as a keepsake; sometimes, the babies are buried in them. I try to let the parents pick out which gown they want on their baby. Sometimes, it's the only parenting they get to do."

The Wee Care projects seem to have opened many unexpected channels for communication and emotional healing, as women have noted that stitching the tiny gowns helps them to talk about their own losses.

The project is a gratifying experience in which many guild members participate, especially when letters like the following are received, "This note is to say thank you to the individual who donated their time to smock a small gown for our local hospital. My grandson was born on February 3rd. How excited we were until about four hours later when he became critically ill with a genetic disorder. We said good-bye to him on February 5th. He was dressed in a white gown with blue smocking at the neckline and on the sleeves. We were grateful for the donation of this gown, as we did not have knowledge that our time was to be so short with him. His parents have the gown as one of the few things actually used by their son. Again, we thank you for this gift of love."
If you would like to participate in the Wee-Care Program, need further information about it, or have no place to distribute the gowns, please contact the Wee Care Chairman at weecare@smocking.org.

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