

[\[back\]](#)



Quilting to remember

BY CYNTHIA GREENLEE-DONNELL, The Herald-Sun

March 9, 2005 3:32 pm

DURHAM -- For Carol McLaurin, the first cut was the hardest.

Faced with slicing her deceased husband's clothes into patchwork pieces, the Hillsborough resident balked.

"They still have his shape. At first, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. But starting to cut the clothes apart was the first step."

As a student in Durham artist Sherri Wood's "Improvisational Quilt Making and the Process of Grieving" class, McLaurin is making quilt memorials as gifts for her two stepchildren.

These personalized throws will be a physical reminder of her spouse and their father, author Tim McLaurin. He died of esophageal cancer in July 2002. Carol said the quilt allowed her to "keep his clothes without wearing them. I gave some of them away, and I did wear these clothes. Then, I was ready to let go."

Textile artist and sculptor Wood said the cutting of the clothing is a turning point for many of the students in her two-session class.

"It sort of signifies a definite break, a shift of relationships. When somebody dies, all your relationships shift," said Wood.

For James Brooks, putting together such memorials vividly illustrates the grieving process. He directs Chapel Hill's Project Compassion, which sponsors the class and helps area residents deal with end-of-life issues.

"The word 'bereavement' actually comes from a word that means 'to rip apart.' For many people, the experience of grief is a ripping apart," Brooks said. "One of the challenges of our culture is that we really expect grief to be over in a few days or a few weeks. The reality is that grief is really a journey that changes over the months and the years. For more and more people, the arts and creative expression can be a very powerful path to healing.

"Sherri really honors the process of grief," Brooks continued. "She helps people as they bring out the clothes, as they hold the fabric, as they look at ripping them apart. She also helps them face that loss. She asks them, 'Where are we going with this? How can we create something new out of this brokenness?'"

Memorial quilts are not a new idea. Quilters have long used excess fabric for their creations; some have incorporated swatches of fabrics from the deceased's effects and even locks of hair. In the early 1800s, it wasn't unusual to see mortuary samplers, embroidered tableaux that included stitching to look like gravestones and brooding Victorian-style verse.

A more modern example is the AIDS quilt that travels the country. At Project Compassion, there's a Robe of Remembrance, a kimono-style garment where people can sew on a button in memory of a loved one.

But in this contemporary culture that dances around the issue of mortality, putting together a quilt acknowledges the life of a loved one and may make it easier for family and friends to talk about their passing -- if they recognize scraps of that favorite T-shirt or a soft toy incorporated into the blanket.

Wood, who holds a master's in fine arts and a master's in theology, knows the cathartic value of creativity. An artist who wanted to use found objects and to focus on what she calls "service-oriented quilting," she's made quilt memorials honoring her maternal grandmother.

One hangs in her Venable Building studio, with the words "Georgia Wood 1917-2003" stitched in baby-blue thread. Close examination reveals the mandarin collar of a red-and-black robe and long, vertical strips with cheery, floral patterns.

"I always thought of her as severe. I don't remember her wearing all these bright colors, but she did. Most of these [strips] are from housecoats. You definitely know these belonged to a person of a certain generation," Wood said.

In her class, Wood walks participants through selecting their materials, the piecework, the basing and the final binding.

"We're working on something concrete, and the external work is just a vehicle for their interior work. It's not like I'm counseling. I'm teaching them how to cut. It's a physical way to work out grief, and that's really important," she said.

All elements of traditional quilting, the steps take on added significance when each quilt is an abbreviated chronicle of a person or even a family.

Durham's Susannah Breaden is piecing together a quilt for her son and daughter-in-law, whose parents were killed in a tragic car accident.

Retired nurse Elaine Winston, also of Durham, is using her parents' 1936 wedding clothes in her quilt. The collar of her deceased father's white matrimonial suit and the matching pants' button fly are part of one panel. She plans to include her mother's frothy gown, parts of a tablecloth her now 86-year-old mother embroidered and squares from a quilt made by her grandmother.

And Carol McLaurin thinks her finished products will be a fitting tribute to her creative late husband.

"Really, the greatest love story in Tim's life is the one between him and his children. I think these quilts are such an amazing way to extend that relationship, and he can still hold them and unfold them."

"I had been thinking about getting a quilt made; it never occurred to me that I could do it myself. But he was such an affectionate person, I want the children to have a quilt they can wrap themselves in. ... It might not be professional, all planned out in little boxes, but Tim wasn't like that at all. I kind of want [the pieces] to have some curve to them because Tim was an amateur herpetologist" who raised serpents and wrote a novel titled "The Last Great Snake Show."

McLaurin gently laid ink-splotched fragments from a plum-colored L.L. Bean shirt across a table at the Cotton Boll sewing center. She fingered his wedding tie. Folded and unfolded the green-and-black swim trunks he wore the first time they met. Looked at transparent boxes with more clothing -- a sports jacket, faded jeans and flannel pajamas that became his hospital wear.

Those flannels remain intact and won't be part in the quilt because "it's really to honor his life rather than his illness."

Wood said: "The quilt acts as a mnemonic device to say, 'I remember camping with my dad, and this was the flannel shirt he always wore.' Or 'this is the fancy dress she wore at my wedding.' It's sentiment concentrated in this new form."

URL for this article: <http://www.heraldsun.com/features/54-584915.html>

© Copyright 2005. All rights reserved. All material on heraldsun.com is copyrighted by The Durham Herald Company and may not be reproduced or redistributed in any medium except as provided in the site's Terms of Use.

[\[back\]](#)