



## Distance can't stop two groups of Valley men from caring for each other

By Deb Kelly  
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— With shaking hands, the elderly man pulled red and green string from the large brown package, then tore at the paper to expose the cardboard box. Seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him, he opened the top flaps of the box and pulled out a large, white envelope, marked with his name. Inside the envelope, he found several letters, and without checking the other contents of the box, he began reading, a slow smile spreading across his face. For the next 15 minutes, he was lost in the handwritten words, holding the letters close to his face, chuckling from time to time. Around him, other elderly men were excitedly dipping their hands into their own boxes, pulling out brand new socks, gloves, bags of candy and chips, shampoo, lotion, letters and handmade quilts.

### Just Across the River

The drive from Carlisle, Ind., to Hutsonville, Ill., takes about 25 minutes, across the Wabash River and through a couple of tiny towns.

Two groups of men who have a special connection across that distance will probably never get a chance to meet, but that doesn't stop them from thinking about one another.

On the Carlisle end, the men are inmates – known more commonly by the term “offenders” – at the medium-security Wabash Valley Correctional Facility.

On the Hutsonville end, the men are residents of The Heritage, an assisted-living facility catering mostly to veterans, quietly tucked away at the edge of the small town.

On Tuesday, a special delivery was made from the inmates to their friends in Hutsonville – 49 brown paper packages, tied with string, and filled with Christmas presents lovingly made, bought or donated by the inmates – one for each resident of The Heritage.

The participating offenders live in the PLUS unit at the correctional facility. The PLUS program – which stands for “Purposeful Living Units Serve” – is a faith-and-character-based initiative of the Indiana Department of Correction, started in 2005. The long-term goal of the program is to help prepare offenders to re-enter society by equipping them with spiritual, moral and character development skills as well as life skills. At the Wabash Valley facility, there are 100 offenders in the PLUS program, according to Rich Larsen, public information officer for the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility.

As part of the offenders' service, they have learned to make quilts that are then given to those in need. From nursing homes to homeless shelters to addiction recovery centers, more than 650

quilts have been created and given out since June, according to PLUS participant Mitchell Swallows.

Participants also make special quilts for the mothers of Indiana servicemen and women who have been killed in the line of duty.

### **‘Forgotten Men’**

The first connection the PLUS unit had with The Heritage residents occurred this past summer, according to Dutch Gunyon, a longtime volunteer with the PLUS program who has helped coordinate many of the offenders’ service projects.

Gunyon said he originally thought the residents at The Heritage would be a good match for the PLUS participants, because many of them are veterans.

“And both of them groups of men are kind of forgotten men,” Gunyon said.

Swallows said, “When Dutch [Gunyon] first found the place and he come back and told us, it made you realize, you know, sometimes some of our heroes are kind of lost, put away, and forgot about, so it’s really been an experience to give them these things, even though we’ve never met.”

Randy O’Brien, a PLUS participant and former Marine, said, “A lot of the stuff we’ve done on the PLUS unit has been directed toward veterans ... I didn’t have much of a family life growing up, and the Marines became a sort of family for me. Our veterans in this country will always be our family, and getting the opportunity to give back to them is huge.”

Kevin Henry, another PLUS participant who also was a Marine, said, “For me, being a veteran didn’t have much to do with this project – it was more along the lines of, their situation isn’t that much different than ours. A lot of them don’t have family that can come see them.

“Our Christmas couldn’t be what we would’ve liked it to have been,” Henry added, “But why not help them have a better Christmas?”

### **Quilting and Gifting, Inmate Style**

The offenders in the PLUS program don’t always have a lot to work with, and because of where they are and why they’re there, they must be carefully supervised, according to Larsen.

When participants began quilting, there was just one sewing machine, the inmates were only allowed to use children’s blunt scissors, and fabric came from used clothing donated or brought in by Gunyon and other volunteers.

The offenders are still required to use small, blunt scissors, and much of the fabric they use in making quilts is donated, but they now have about 10 sewing machines, many of which have been donated to the unit.

Despite the limitations, however, many inmates love working on the projects, and will often devote long hours to cutting, lining and sewing, according to Jackie Mize, case manager.

The idea of making military-themed Christmas quilts for the residents at The Heritage quickly grew from just quilts to small Christmas packages, and then the giving grew even more.

Swallows said, “That’s how you know you’re doing the right thing; everyone wants to help and get involved.”

Henry said, “When the idea started, we was just going to do the quilts ... then it just kind of snowballed from there; the boxes got bigger and bigger. It was an effort by a lot of people, because a lot of people made the quilts, a lot of people in-house donated money to help buy some of the stuff, other guys took time to write letters, guys came up to help wrap boxes and put stuff in ’em, it was the whole unit that did it.”

Swallows added, “It was nice to see. We had guys out there quiltin’ – nighttime, daytime – and they was just so enthused, it really helped our unit to come together.”

Larsen said the effort was “really reflective of what the unit has been doing year-round, and especially during the holiday season, they’ve been involved in multiple projects, but this one I think is probably, in this time of giving and togetherness, this is very reflective of all those things.”

When asked if the PLUS participants intend to continue their relationship with The Heritage residents, the three inmates being interviewed nodded vigorously.

Mitchell said, “One of our first thoughts was, why don’t we just adopt ‘em?”

### **‘Overwhelming’**

It took Gunyon, his wife Kathy, and Carolyn Cummings, a substance abuse counselor in the PLUS unit, along with the help of several other prison staff, to cart out the nearly 50 gift boxes. Each box went through a metal detector before being loaded into the Gunyons’ vehicles and driven to their recipients in Hutsonville.

The men at The Heritage wore looks of surprise and interest as the ones who were able came to the door to help carry in the packages, each one marked with an individual name.

Sherrie Malicoat, assistant administrator at The Heritage, said, “We’re just overwhelmed, absolutely overwhelmed.”

The men at The Heritage, many of whom are Vietnam or Korean war veterans, became gleeful as their names were called. Gunyon handed each one his own box, with a hearty, “Merry Christmas!”

“All right, it’s everything I need!” one resident called out as he began sorting through the items in his box.

One resident pulled his quilt out and held it up before folding it carefully and showing nearby residents: “Look what I got!”

Howard Fewell, a retired Marine and veteran of the Vietnam War from Kokomo, stood and saluted Gunyon as he was handed his gift box. He smiled broadly.

One of the residents called out, “You tell the inmates we said thanks!”

Malicoat said, “Sometimes, when someone doesn’t get remembered for a while and then someone comes in with something for them, it’s just overwhelming.”

She added, with a smile, “I’ll be hearing about this for weeks!”

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