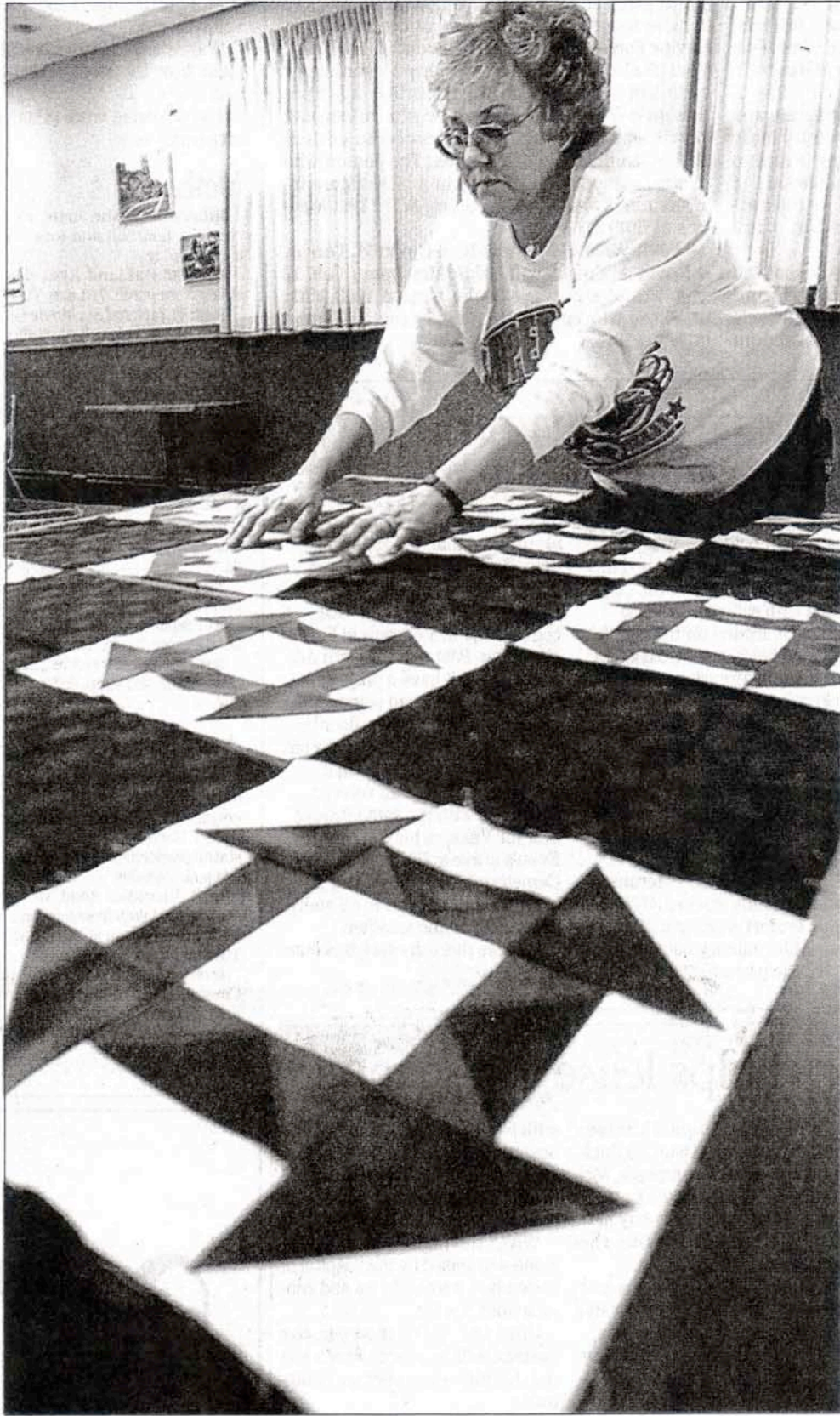


Gone but not forgotten



KEN YUSZKUS/Staff photo

Barbara A. O'Neill lays out quilt squares at the North Andover VFW Post. She will later sew them together at her Haverhill home. She is making quilts for all the veterans from Haverhill. She lost a son, Evan O'Neill, to the war in Afghanistan.

Mourning mom sews quilts for veterans

BY GRACE RUBENSTEIN
STAFF WRITER

HAVERHILL — The day before he died, Barbara O'Neill's son called and told her how cold and dark it was at night in Afghanistan.

She was sewing a quilt for him then, but put it away unfinished after the news came. Now, she is filling her days with a new purpose. She is giving warmth, if not to her son, then to the people he most admired — the veterans of Haverhill.

O'Neill and her best friend, Beverly True of Yarmouth, Maine, put a notice on the Internet Oct. 15 — 16 days after 19-year-old Pfc. Evan W. O'Neill was shot by a Taliban sniper —

that they were setting out to make a quilt for every disabled veteran in the Veterans Northeast Outreach Center homes in Haverhill.

There are 47 residents in the organization's three homes, Executive Director John E. Ratka said, and a new, 10-unit home — to be named after Evan O'Neill — is set to break ground Feb. 27 on Beacon Street.

In three months, the women's Internet group has swelled to 105 members who send quilt pieces, whole quilts or just words of support from as far away as Iceland and California. A quilters guild in Pennsylvania sent a box of 220 blocks — the patterned squares that are sewn together into a quilt —

mostly in fabrics colored red, white and blue.

"I cried over every one," O'Neill said. She is amazed by "the workmanship, the complexity, the colors" of what people send. She has 26 completed quilts in her home, she said, and True has at least 16 in Maine.

Since the death of her only child, O'Neill has cut back her work at the Village Deli in Andover from five days a week to one or two.

"It seems like every time I work I'm always seeing somebody who will bring back a memory," she said, like the girlfriend of one of Evan's friends or co-workers of her husband,

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QUILTS: Days spent sewing, healing

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Andover fire Lt. Michael J. O'Neill.

So most days, she just sews.

She works in what used to be the dining room, where the table is piled with colorful blocks and swaths of fabric. There are four sewing machines in the room — some for detail work, some for broad strokes — and an ironing board in the corner is buried under finished quilts. Her three Dalmatians and her favorite 1980s music channel on TV combat the silence.

"It's probably given me a reason to get out of bed in the morning," she said. "It gives you something to focus on."

It was Evan who inspired her to

start quilting in the first place — her mother helped her make him a baby quilt before he was born. The little boy got so attached to the next quilt she made him, decorated with sailboats, that he dragged it around until it was "a rag," said his father. "He tried to take it to kindergarten in his backpack."

Another gift from his mother — a playing card-sized quilt with the image of a red, white and blue ribbon sewn on, meant to memorialize the victims of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 — was in his wallet when he died.

Once the Haverhill veterans homes are fully stocked, O'Neill wants to start sending quilts elsewhere, like military hospitals. Partly, the project she and True

started has gained so much momentum that she expects to have more quilts than the Haverhill homes can use. Partly, she just wants to keep going.

Michael O'Neill, senior vice commander at Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2104 in North Andover, doesn't have a project like his wife does. He had planned to replace the sliding glass door before Evan died, he said, but he put it on hold. Every day he isn't working, the Vietnam veteran decorated with the same Bronze Star for Valor as his son goes to Evan's grave at Ridgewood Cemetery in North Andover and stays for half an hour to an hour, depending on the weather.

He goes there, he said, to salute him.