

Tampa woman finds peace one stitch at a time by sewing for injured veterans

By [Kim Wilmath](#), Times Staff Writer
In Print: Wednesday, September 23, 2009

As part of her volunteer work with Sew Much Comfort, Diana Anderson has made custom clothes for Staff Sgt. Pedro Medina, who is recovering at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center in Tampa. "She's an angel," Medina said.



TAMPA — Staff Sgt. Pedro Medina's body went still five months ago beneath a crumbled building in Afghanistan. His neck was broken, pelvis cracked, heel shattered, ligaments torn. He couldn't shake hands, raise a spoonful of Jell-O to his lips or put on a shirt.

He endured surgeries and hospital stays clad in a flimsy gown.

It was too painful to squeeze regular clothes over his bruised body and bandages and too difficult to deal with buttons.

And then one day Diana Anderson walked into his room at the veterans hospital with a measuring tape and a clipboard.

She handed him a V-neck shirt to fit around his neck brace and shorts with Velcro down the side. The shirt was adorned with Philadelphia Eagles regalia, but the avowed Chicago Bears fan didn't care.

In these clothes he felt normal.

"You just can't put a price on it," Medina said. "She's an angel."

But Anderson said she's not seeking praise. Like Medina, she's seeking comfort, too.

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Anderson volunteers for the national nonprofit group [Sew Much Comfort](#), which boasts 30,000 clothing deliveries since 2004. Velcro strips make it easier for veterans with limited movement or [prosthetic limbs](#) to dress themselves.

Ask Anderson, 63, to show you [how the altered shirts work](#), and she'll whip one out and try it on. Ask her about the recipients, and she'll go on about custom-made Led Zeppelin or sports-themed outfits.

But ask her why she does it, and she catches her breath.

"Gratitude," she says, before the tears start. "My husband ..."

Jim died in January at age 65. He served four years in the Navy starting in 1964. Two years ago he suggested he and Anderson volunteer at the [James A. Haley Veterans Hospital](#).

She worked in the cafe and organized Sew Much Comfort deliveries. He ran the tram. They met for lunch.

"He made everybody laugh," Anderson said. "I thought I'd never laugh again."

His voice is still on the answering machine.

Anderson met Jim at a high school party in Long Island, N.Y., and they started dating a year later. She was 16, he was 18. They went water skiing and saw the Radio City Rockettes.

They spent just about every day together until the winter of 1964. Jim joined the Navy, knowing he'd be drafted sooner or later, and by the summer he was stationed in Rio de Janeiro.

"It just killed me," Anderson remembers. "I missed him so much."

They stayed in touch for four years, but when he accepted a six-month extension when his time was up, "I decided he was just not that into me," Anderson said. "So I broke up with him." She moved to Miami.

Two and a half years later, Jim flew to Florida and proposed.

They were married 39 years and had two kids. Jim worked at GTE Federal Credit Union, Anderson taught at Brandon High School.

For a long time before Jim's heart gave out, he told Anderson he'd probably be the first to go. "So whenever I hugged him, I hugged him for a long time. I'm grateful for that."

At first, it was painful being back at the VA alone. But like the veterans, Anderson found healing there — in the smiles and thank yous that kept coming. So she kept sewing.

"Without my husband, it's another sense of joy," she said.

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Pedro Medina remembers May 18 and the days that followed in painful snippets.

He got out of a helicopter in Afghanistan and walked toward a building with an overhang. The chopper took off, the ground shook, the overhang fell. Darkness.

Medina, a military police officer and Chicago cop, can still hear his captain's voice asking if he's all right. He couldn't feel anything below his neck.

The next thing he remembers is being loaded onto a helicopter, a medic reassuring him. Then he's at the [Bagram Air Base](#) in Afghanistan, a veterans hospital in Germany and finally at [Walter Reed Army Medical Center](#) in Washington, D.C.

Medina pauses, inhaling and exhaling, trying to keep the tears at bay. His 36-year-old sister, Delilah, says they don't usually talk about those days.

"To see him one way and then see him helpless, it's hard," she said.

Delilah, who has been caring for Medina since he arrived in the United States, picks up a thick notebook and flips backward. Her first entry is May 22, when she saw him at Walter Reed.

On May 26, Medina moved his left leg, and doctors said it was a sign he'd likely walk again. Two days later, he had surgery to pin his neck and foot back together. He came to Tampa June 18.

On Aug. 4, Medina's neck brace came off. He stood up and walked for the first time Aug. 13, a few hundred feet with the help of a walker. "It was beautiful," Delilah wrote.

Most days, Medina is in physical therapy or with doctors. When he's on his own, he kneads his hands constantly, trying to coax movement from the damaged nerves.

Soon, Medina says, he won't need Velcro on his clothes. He shows his sister how he can pinch two more fingers.

In the meantime, Anderson appears with another pair of shorts. They laugh about how well they matched his outfit.

Then a voice on the hospital's PA system calls for Medina to report to an appointment. He thanks her for the new shorts, turns his wheelchair and heads down the hallway.

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You can help

Interested in volunteering for Sew Much Comfort? Visit sewmuchcomfort.org