

Published: August 29, 2011

Hazel Park MI

“Sew’ your support for the troops”

Sew Much Comfort makes quality adaptive clothing for injured soldiers

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HAZEL PARK — Thanks to advances in body armor, soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are surviving blows that would’ve killed them outright before. But it comes at a cost, leaving them with grievous injuries that in some cases never heal.

Equally daunting is the psychological loss of normalcy that comes with disfigurement. Stores don’t sell clothes that fit over casts, prosthetics and fixators, bulky devices that hold bones together. So, stuck in a hospital gown, the soldier feels robbed of his or her dignity.

Working to address this problem is Sew Much Comfort, a nationally recognized nonprofit that provides adaptive clothing for wounded service members from all branches of the military and National Guard, free of charge.

“In some small way, we’re trying to provide as much comfort and dignity as we can,” said Michele Cuppy, SMC co-founder. “One (wounded) serviceman said, ‘You just have no idea how embarrassing it was to have my wife dress me because I couldn’t, but the moment I got adaptive clothing, I was able to do it myself.’”

Skilled seamstresses make the clothes from quality materials. The garments feature Velcro straps and such that make life easier for the injured. For example, a man with a prosthetic leg who had to go to the bathroom five times a day to take off his pants and stop the swelling can simply open his pant leg to expand the prosthetic.

There are all sorts of clothes, from underwear and swimsuits to street clothes and formal wear, and you’d never know they’re adaptive from the looks of them. They look just like normal clothes, but they’re designed with input from the wounded and medical personnel.

Currently there are between 900 and 1,200 volunteers across the U.S. and Germany, the latter being where severely wounded troops in the Middle East are transported. Since their start in November 2004, SMC has created over 115,000 pieces of adaptive clothes.

Volunteers sign up and are sent instruction packets detailing SMC’s copyrighted designs. If they think they have the skill, they make a sample garment and send it to SMC’s quality check department in Boulder, Colo., which doubles as their distribution point to military hospitals around the U.S. and overseas. If the sample garment meets SMC’s exacting standards, the volunteer can then make more clothes.

“This requires skill. It is not for absolute beginner sewers; we need advanced sewers,” said Pat Quintero of Hazel Park, regional director for Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Ohio. “These are going to be put on people that are injured. You can’t have strings hanging. Everything has to be brand-new. Everything has to be washed with non-allergic soap prior to sewing. You have to be much more particular. Just because it’s charity doesn’t mean the quality doesn’t matter.”

Point in case: Volunteer groups have been cut in the past for just using what they had on hand, such as cheap or non-color-coordinated materials. SMC doesn’t settle for less than the best. It’s part of their attitude of gratitude to the troops that gave the nation their all.

“These people have made such a sacrifice for their country and for us, so we have to give them the highest quality everything, not just the materials of the garment, but the sewing, as well,” Quintero said.

Quintero has come to appreciate the benefits of their work firsthand. When she had hip surgery recently, the recovery process was made easier by the same adaptive clothing they make for the troops.

Not only did she not need a hospital gown when she went to the doctor, but “when I look down, I see normal clothing,” Quintero said, “and mentally, it puts me back on the road to normalcy.”

To make the clothes feel like home, they also ask the injured soldiers what they’re passionate about — a favorite sports team, perhaps, or maybe a music group — and emblazon their clothes with matching motifs.

While the majority of sewing is done by individuals working alone in the privacy of their own homes, Quintero does organize “Sew Days” for her 200-some Michigan volunteers once a month at Haberman Fabrics on Main Street in Royal Oak.

There, they work together to create X amount of whatever item is currently needed, so that hospitals aren’t short-shipped. The seamstresses also share tips and enjoy each other’s company.

Those who can’t sew can help out in other ways, though. SMC’s biggest need is donations, so they can continue to provide supplies to their volunteers.

“What we do is wonderful,” Quintero said.

To donate, visit <http://www.sewmuchcomfort.org>. All major credit cards are accepted. They also accept un-adapted garments.

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