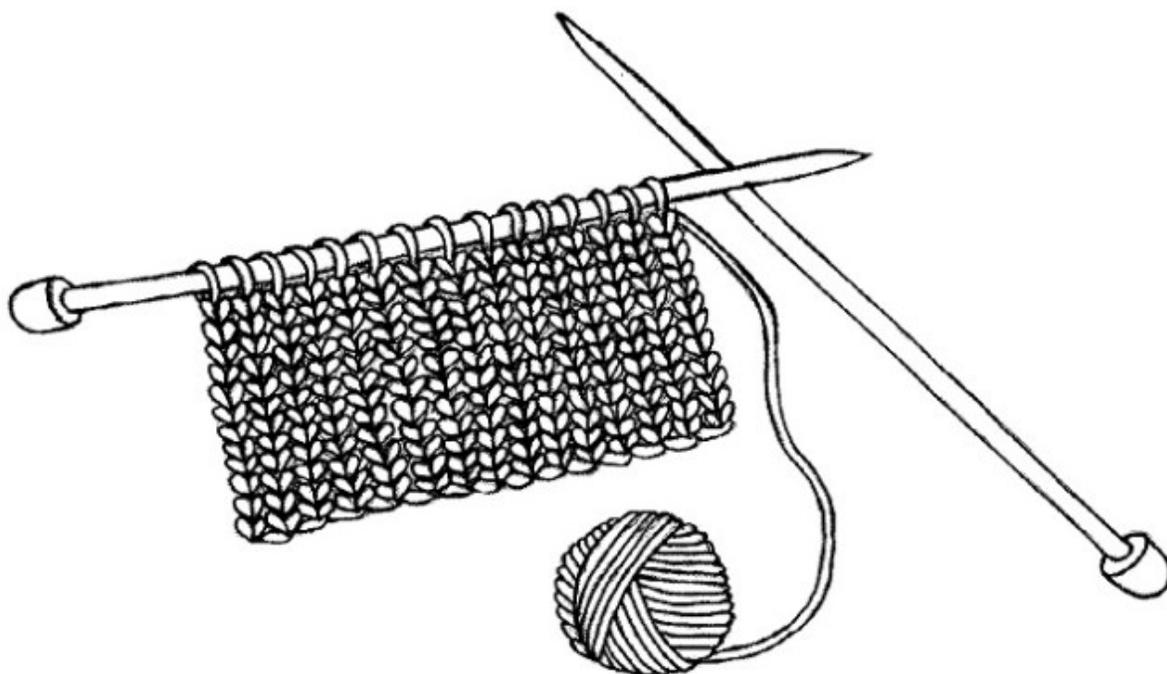




Sean of the South

The Knitting Club

Sean Dietrich October 6, 2020



She's every Methodist woman you grew up with. She is elderly, but still cooks.

She can turn anything into a casserole or a deep-fried surprise. Hand her an old softball and, with enough peanut oil and flour, she'll make supper. She makes a killer pound cake. Her chicken and dumplings is off the chain.

And she knits. A lot.

She knits prayer shawls for anyone undergoing medical treatment or suffering disaster. Sometimes the shawls are given anonymously. Other times at special occasions. Wrap one around yourself and you will instantly smell like her living room.

She is one of an army. There are millions like her. From Sasketchwan to Birmingham. From Beijing to Texarkana. These women live under the radar. They rarely talk about their artwork because their creations are not earthly objects. And these are not proud women.

Their prayer shawls are not for sale. They are reserved for oncology units, emergency rooms, intensive care, and funeral parlors.

Visit any pediatric cancer ward. Peek into rooms and you'll see these prayer shawls. They're draped over beds, wrapped around young shoulders, laid upon the deceased, or used to mop the tears of the grieving.

They are used for comfort, assurance, bereavement, stress, fear, clinical depression, marriages, birthdays, suicides, chemotherapy, baby showers, adoptions, reunions, death row inmates, dedications, homegoings, homecomings, hospice care, graduations, COVID-19 victims, and broken hearts.

The whole thing started with two ladies from Hartford, Connecticut. Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo started knitting special shawls for friends and family 22 years ago. Almost overnight their idea spread like a brushfire on the plains.

The creation process is straightforward: a shawl maker begins knitting while simultaneously praying. The craftswoman whispers her prayers the whole way through, with each movement of her needles.

The shawls take about 20 hours to make. Which is roughly 1,200 minutes' worth of Granny's sincerest prayers.

And not just old women make them. Prayer shawls come from teenage girls learning to crochet, middle-aged women with big hearts, and army veterans learning to knit in rehab classes.

They are made on Baptist porches. They are crafted on Sunday mornings by women in the Catholic nursery who babysit toddlers in ten-pound diapers.

The shawls are made by people like Kay, from Emporia, Kansas.

Kay tells the story:

"I was sitting, knitting a prayer shawl during my mother-in-law's open-heart surgery when a kind, curious older lady came up to me in the hospital."

The woman asked about Kay's shawl. Kay told her what it was. The older woman asked if she could buy the shawl.

"I explained," said Kay, "that I never charged for them, but made them freely for anyone in need."

The woman told Kay she needed a special shawl like that because her life was a mess. So Kay said sure, she would finish it and find the woman later to give it to her.

Kay did just that. She found the woman that afternoon in the hospital. The lady's husband was in ICU, and not expected to live.

"I wrapped the shawl around her," Kay said, "and gave her a big hug. We said a prayer together."

Their paths continued to cross for the next few days. And each time Kay saw the woman, the lady was wearing the shawl.

And Teri Heart, in Dixon, Illinois:

"This story starts in the cornfields of Illinois," said Teri. "With a 12-year-old boy working in the fields."

The boy was Teri's grandson. He used the money he earned working the cornrows to buy three skeins of yarn for his grandmother. He knew how much she liked to knit shawls.

But there was a problem. It takes more than three skeins to make a shawl. So Granny had to get inventive.

Instead of knitting prayer shawls, she began making prayer hats for the neonatal intensive care unit. She gave them to sick babies. And for many babies, Teri's hats would represent the first and last gift they would ever receive.

"As I crocheted these tiny hats," said Teri, "I wove the love of a 12-year-old boy and his grandma into each stitch and whispered my prayers."

And don't forget Dee, in Pennsylvania.

When Dee found out her mother had lung cancer, she rushed to get a shawl. She sent the shawl to her mother in Missouri.

"I told her I couldn't be there all the time," said Dee. "But every time she felt cold, lonely, sad, ill, or hurt, I told her to wrap the shawl around her and feel my love, and my arms reaching out to hold her."

Her mother died. After the funeral, Dee took the tear-stained shawl back to Pennsylvania and kept it with her until years later when her best friend became ill. Whereupon Dee packed the shawl in brown paper and sent it to her friend.

Her friend wore the thing night and day, and eventually recovered. She kept the shawl for upwards of 10 years. Until Dee got sick.

The illness hit Dee like a freightliner. One day she was shuffling to her mailbox, and—well—I think you already know where this is going.

“When I got my diagnosis, I was undergoing treatments, and one of the first things I got in the mail was my mom’s old shawl. I cried. It had come full circle.”

And now I leave you with the tiny elderly woman I told you about earlier.

She is an Alabamian who prefers to remain anonymous. She has knitted over 4,000 shawls. Maybe more. Her husband passed away many years ago. She still knits them even though her hands are deformed with age. Even though her eyes are bad.

I ask what keeps her knitting.

“Oh, I do it because it feels like someone’s hugging you, like two arms. I’m hugging people with this shawl. And angels are hugging them too.”

I believe the old Methodist is right.

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1.



Nancy - October 6, 2020 8:21 am

My daughter received one and took it to college with her. When she was down she’d wrap up in it knowing that someone prayed for her. When her friends found out about it, they would come and borrow it when things were bad. It’s not magical but it makes those prayers tangible and that’s a wonderful feeling

2. [Reply](#)

Lori Klein - October 6, 2020 9:54 am

“They rarely talk about their artwork because their creations are not earthly objects.”
That's one of the best sentences you've crafted Shawn.

Thank you for this. Sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night (I've got an angry back and neuromuscular problems, and today I had a spinal injection), I take my medicine and read tomorrow's column to relax, and help me feel better. It's a darn near foolproof solution.

I'm grateful for your writings.

3. [Reply](#)

Brenda - October 6, 2020 11:37 am

This touched my heart and made me cry! I know many such generous women who make shawls, blankets and quilts to wrap those in need of encouragement in love and prayer. They are a special breed.

4. [Reply](#)

MR - October 6, 2020 11:43 am

Beautiful and heartwarming. Thank you for this ray of sunshine, Sean.

5. [Reply](#)

Virginia Russell - October 6, 2020 11:54 am

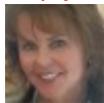
How am I reading comments from the future? It's 7:53 am here and these other comments are from 8:21 on

6. [Reply](#)

Cathy - October 6, 2020 12:05 pm

Sitting under one right now. What a beautiful writing today Sean. Thank you.

7. [Reply](#)



Patricia A Schmaltz - October 6, 2020 12:23 pm

Crying again! Thank you though. Sending you hugs too!

8. [Reply](#)



Terri - October 6, 2020 12:29 pm

I had goosebumps the entire time I was reading your column Sean. Your writing blessed me (not as much as one of those prayer shawls would though). Love you much.

9. [Reply](#)



Edith Clark - October 6, 2020 12:58 pm

I too am a knitter of prayer shawls. I don't know how many , but I keep on knitting. I am now 80 and my knitting is getting slower. But I am still at it. God bless you.
Methodist grandma knitter

10. [Reply](#)



Phil - October 6, 2020 1:02 pm

Thanks for writing about prayer shawls, Sean. We had a Prayer Shawl Ministry in our church until the pandemic. It was kind of like an old fashioned quilting bee, but these ladies would meet to knit and pray. Maybe they still are, individually. I have a shawl that was made for me by a dear saint of a lady who has now gone on to the Church Triumphant. She was a sparkling light of God's love, much like the ones you wrote about. Keep knitting and keep praying, ladies.

11. [Reply](#)



Jan - October 6, 2020 1:03 pm

Beautiful words just like a beautiful prayer shawl from a beautiful, loving, caring person.
Thank you, Sean.

12. [Reply](#)



Sheri Smith - October 6, 2020 1:21 pm

These stories are countless and many of these sweet people are everywhere. One is my sweet momma who lives here in Pensacola. She makes hats for VA patients, knits wash clothes to share with family, friends and those in need. She makes placemats to brighten people's kitchens and she makes every stitch with love. Thank you for helping me to know just how special this craft is.

13. [Reply](#)



Deena - October 6, 2020 1:22 pm

This one is extra special , Sean. Your heart is full of love for people and it shows. 💕

14. [Reply](#)



Patricia Gibson - October 6, 2020 1:39 pm

Absolutely. I received one in the hospital although mine was a quilt and knots are tied by each person praying. A wonderful thing to have when you need prayers.

15. [Reply](#)



Judi Lawrence - October 6, 2020 1:48 pm

Thank you Sean. I received a prayer shawl after cat 5 hurricane Michael destroyed my hometown, Panama City two years ago. The shawl was a reminder that Gods grace and love were still present when much was taken away. These shawl makers are indeed angels of mercy. Thanks for your beautiful words and their talented hands.

16. [Reply](#)



Connie - October 6, 2020 2:00 pm

Dang it Sean. Now my eyes are leaking. God bless all the people who send love with their shawls and blankets and food.

17. [Reply](#)



Dan Wise - October 6, 2020 2:01 pm

Fond memories in my rear view memory banks. Time spent with my maternal Grandparents while my parent worked during the day. Grandmother Catherine Sessions with her quilting bee queens. Crawling around under the suspended loom. Just trying to stay out of the path between the queens and their spittoons.

18. [Reply](#)



[Anne Arthur](#) - October 6, 2020 2:01 pm

At a healing retreat, we received and distributed prayer shawls. It was the most precious gift apart from God's healing. God bless those beautiful souls knitting their prayers into a tangible, comforting shawl.

19. [Reply](#)



billlly - October 6, 2020 2:12 pm

One of your most touching pieces. It reminds me of the really good people in the world! Thank you. I needed to read this. billlly

20. [Reply](#)



Donna - October 6, 2020 2:15 pm

My mother picked her needles back up ten years ago. She hadn't knit in years, but she needed a hobby and she needed to make some friends, because most of hers had passed away. She makes prayer shawls for our little Episcopal church, where she's made new friends, and even said goodbye to some of them. I've made a few, too, but I'm pretty sure

hers have far more prayer and a touch of magic in them. Thank you and bless you for seeing her.

21. [Reply](#)



[Helen De Prima](#) - October 6, 2020 2:17 pm

And now shawls have become masks. I wish I'd started counting when I began, but I know my numbers are well into the hundreds, mostly to the Navajo and now to the Northern Cheyenne. It's not just the physical item but also the message that someone you'll never meet is sending love and concern with every stitch.

22. [Reply](#)



[Sharon Brock](#) - October 6, 2020 2:33 pm

I crochet afghans and lap robes and piece and quilt the same. I have an individual in mind for these for each and everyone and think of them with each stitch. Crocheting and quilting were inexpensive hobbies and stress therapy when I was raising my son. God's love for me and HIS strength were in every stitch. Thank you Sean. This was a beautiful column.

23. [Reply](#)



[jstephenw](#) - October 6, 2020 2:40 pm

Damn Sean, I felt so angry, mad and unteathered when I went to bed last night after watching President Trump yesterday and wondering how in the hell our country got here in this COVID-19 mess. But your piece today gives me hope that there are many more of us reasonable, compassionate, caring people out there that will bring us back to a reasonable, safe place. Thank you. Hey to Jamie.

24. [Reply](#)



[Donna](#) - October 6, 2020 2:45 pm

Thank You Sean for your rays of love & light. I need to learn to knit.

25. [Reply](#)



Pat - October 6, 2020 2:46 pm

I'm not sure at all that I am correct but, I think it has to do with Greenwich Mean Time. We are 4 hours behind it.

26. [Reply](#)



Pat - October 6, 2020 2:48 pm

I'm not sure at all that I am correct but, I think it has to do with Greenwich Mean Time. We are 4 hours behind it.

27. [Reply](#)



Ginger S - October 6, 2020 2:59 pm

My aunt knits baby hats for the local hospital. She is near you, Sean, in Florida.

28. [Reply](#)



amy - October 6, 2020 3:10 pm

What a fabulous story. I was blessed to receive one of those beautiful prayer shawls from the ladies group at the Methodist Church my parents attend when I was sick. What a blessing it was to me then and still is today.

29. [Reply](#)



Amy - October 6, 2020 3:18 pm

What a wonderful story Sean. I have been the blessed recipient of one of these prayer shawls. These are very special ladies indeed.

30. [Reply](#)



Christina - October 6, 2020 3:47 pm

I see angel wings embracing each one wrapped in these shawls and hats. Most tender and loving prayers rising above. God bless these hands and their hearts!

31. [Reply](#)



Andy Gartman - October 6, 2020 4:14 pm

Thanks for finally writing something positive about Methodists. Lol!! Just jerking your chain, Sean.

Your preacher buddy.

32. [Reply](#)



Linda Moon - October 6, 2020 5:42 pm

Some of my best Methodist friends are “Angels”, and I have one of those shawls you told us about. Full and Unbroken Circles are indescribable. But you told Dee’s story and also a father’s story that sits on my bookshelf very well, Author. I’m “hugging” you and Dee right now!

33. [Reply](#)



Mark Daigle - October 6, 2020 5:57 pm

Perfectly woven words Sean. Your writings keep me grounded and humble. There are awesome people out there, and that’s the real news.

34. [Reply](#)



Melissa Williams - October 6, 2020 6:29 pm

“Look for the helpers” Fred Rogers

Sean, you may not know it but, through your writing. You are a helper too!!!

35. [Reply](#)



Elizabeth - October 6, 2020 7:22 pm

That's really lovely! My Aunt Karen's niece (on other side of my Aunt's family) had sent her a prayer shawl ... a month or so before she passed on... I know that shawl and the love it contained meant a lot to her! I love how you find so many things to write about that are uplifting, encouraging and interesting! Thank you so much for that!

36. **Reply**



MAM - October 6, 2020 9:52 pm

As Helen said above, and now they are masks. My neighbor has made probably hundreds. She gifted us with masks. A whole bunch of women in our small town have made masks, for healthcare workers, for regular folks and for anyone who needs them. God blesses you, Sean, every day in your writing. And you bless us with your words. Thanks!

37. **Reply**



K. D. Kempf Jones - October 6, 2020 10:33 pm

Thank you for this lovely and Loving description of the gift of prayer shawls. [BTW – In addition to knitting, many crochet them.]

To me, one of the most important facts about them is that every stitch has a prayer said along with it. It just doesn't get much better than this for all of us working through this earthly existence – to know you are being enveloped in prayer is terrific. Once again – Thank you for this good news!

38. **Reply**



Sandi Thomas - October 7, 2020 2:42 am

God loves those who give from their hearts. These ladies are giving comfort to those from a sickly newborn to an older person needing comfort. God bless each person whose hands have touched these priceless knitted gifts.

39. **Reply**



dbdicks430 - October 7, 2020 3:14 am

Our prayer shawl group at a small Presbyterian church has knitted, crocheted or woven more than 400 shawls in just 6 years...we always pray as a group for the individual receiving the shawl before it is given or sent to anyone in our community or circle of friends, many who are not our church members.. Some we donate to a nearby cancer center for them to distribute as needed...occasionally we will present baby blankets to new little ones. The notes we receive from our recipients are heart-warming and keep us working away.

Thanks for writing such a beautiful piece describing the prayer shawl ministry. You nailed it!

[Reply](#)

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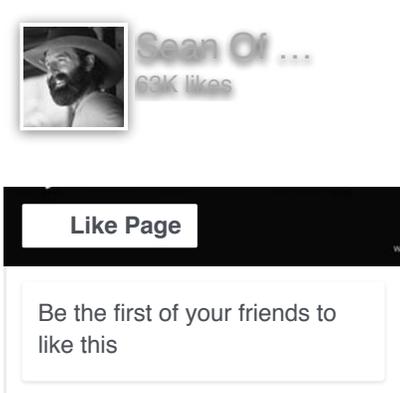
Sean Dietrich

Sean Dietrich is a columnist, and novelist, known for his commentary on life in the American South. His work has appeared in Southern Living, The Tallahassee Democrat, Good Grit, South Magazine, Alabama Living, the Birmingham News, Thom Magazine, The Mobile Press Register, and he has authored seven books.

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A screenshot of a Facebook 'Like' button for the page 'Sean Of ...'. The button is black with a white 'Like Page' label. Above the button, there is a profile picture of a man with a beard and a hat, and the text '69K likes'. Below the button, there is a white box with the text 'Be the first of your friends to like this'.