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FRIDAY

August 18, 2006

Vol. 18 No. 33

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Quilts provide comfort

by **Brooke Larsen**

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Rita Crawford's sewing machine has always brought her comfort.

The 36-year-old seamstress started sewing doll clothes at age 10, handing the tiny dresses to her mother when it was time to do the button holes.

So when her seven-year-old stepson, Kristopher, was hit and killed by a dump truck while riding his bike on Pitt River Road, Crawford turned to sewing, making a memory quilt that combined photos of Kristopher with strips of royal blue and neon green cloth.

"I would be lost without a sewing machine for sure," says Crawford, who lived in Port Coquitlam before moving to Creston.

"This is how I calm myself, how I work through things."

Crawford is sharing that comfort through her new business, Kootenay Custom Quilting, sewing personalized quilts to commemorate lost loved ones.

The result is more meaningful and comforting than a photo in a frame could ever be, Crawford says.

"Sure, you can put a photo in a frame — we all have them around our house — but something on fabric, something you can touch, that's tangible, that's what really sets a quilt apart."

She will never forget that first memory quilt, sewn shortly after Sept. 7, 2004, the first day of school.

Crawford and her son, Parker, were living in Port Coquitlam with her fiancé, Kris Sheloff and his son, Kristopher.

Crawford took the boys on a bike ride down Pitt River Road after picking them up from Riverview Park Elementary.

Time slows down when Crawford remembers the accident — Kristopher's front bike tire leaving the curb, the tire catching on the wheel of a passing dump truck, Kristopher being dragged

Quilter Rita Crawford displays some of her memory quilts. She made the first one to help her then-fiancé deal with the loss of his son, who was killed when he was hit by a dump truck while riding his bike.

Adam Proskiw/NOW

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NEWS

'It doesn't have to be for people that are grieving'

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underneath.

"It was just absolutely horrible. Everything is just in slow motion for me whenever I think about that."

Kristopher, a little boy who loved Lego and Harry Potter, died in hospital at 9 p.m. that day, just two weeks shy of his eighth birthday.

Crawford struggled to console her fiancé, who was shattered and confused by the loss of his son.

"It's very hard to stand by someone you love and watch them go through all that hardship, and you're going through it, too, and all you want to do is take that pain away, and you can't."

So Crawford did the next best thing.

"It just all of a sudden popped into my head: I'm going to make a memory quilt for Kris. This is what I can do."

Crawford began to sift through pictures of Kristopher — the earliest taken on the day he was born, the last taken on their front steps just before school started on his final day — and printed 10 of them onto fabric using special printer ink. Then, carefully, secretly, Crawford began to stitch the patches of Kristopher's short life into a quilt.

"I wanted it to be a surprise for him [Sheloff], and it was hard because we just had a small place.

"Every time he'd come in I'd just sort of bunch it up and put it to the side, and he'd be none the wiser."

The quilt was ready for Sheloff on Christmas Day, his first without his son.

"When I gave it to him for Christmas, the tears just flowed freely. I remember him just lying on the couch, cuddling up with it, holding it."

The quilt hangs outside the couple's bed-

room. It is one of the first things they see in the morning.

But that was just the beginning. Crawford had shown the quilt to family members at different stages in its creation, and several asked for their own Kristopher quilts. As a result, she had orders for several quilts before the first one was finished.

About a year later, when Crawford was looking for a job, she realized she could turn quilting into a business, while helping people deal with the loss of loved ones.

"That's when I thought, 'Forget looking for work. This is what I want to do.'

"I decided I wanted to help other people who have been in our situation, because I've seen how therapeutic that quilt was for Kris."

Along the way, Crawford's customers — who live in Creston and the Lower Mainland — have asked for quilts remembering pets, celebrating births and immortalizing weddings. Their requests have alerted her to a broader

market.

"People want them for pets, for babies, for weddings. It doesn't have to be for people who are grieving. It's for everybody."

Crawford charges \$95 for a small quilt and \$795 for a queen-sized bedspread with 10 photos. A variety of prices and sizes fall in between.

Although sorrow and loss surround many of the quilts she makes, Rita finds the process uplifting. As she sews the pictures together, she imagines the comfort the quilt will bring to its owner.

"When I'm sewing, I know that someone is going to cherish this. This is a piece of art," she says. "Someone really wants this."

• To find out more about Rita Crawford's quilts, go to www.kcquilting.com.

“*People want them for pets, for babies, for weddings.*”

Rita Crawford
Quilter