

Grace Stitchers ensure babies are warm coming home from hospital



They're preparing for annual Baby Shower for Shore Memorial Hospital

SOMERS POINT — A group of about a dozen women meets weekly to chat, share cookies and coffee and trade tips on fiber arts all for a good cause — actually multiple good causes.

The Grace Stitchers is a knitting and crafting group based at Grace Lutheran Church in Somers Point, where the members meet from 10:30 a.m. to noon Fridays in the lounge.

Robin Johnson, a member of the group “with the biggest mouth,” said participation at the monthly meetings fluctuates but a solid core of women is always present.

“Sometimes we don’t all make it. Sometimes we have guests, you know, or people that we know want to stop in. Sometimes there’s a couple more members,” she said.

Bettie Cross founded the Stitchers two decades ago and the 96-year-old is still head of the group, now preparing for its 20th annual Baby Shower. It is set for noon May 15 in the church’s Fellowship Hall.

This year, Reformation Lutheran Church in Galloway Township will be joining the group at the shower, where the ladies will hand over everything its members have made and collected for distribution to mothers in need.

“We’re prolific; we do a lot of stuff. As you can see, we’re always busy doing stuff,” Cross said during a recent visit.

The Baby Shower benefits the maternity unit at Shore Medical Center as well as any other new mothers in need.

The Stitchers create handmade items for babies, such as blankets, hats and wraps, that they distribute to attendees during the free luncheon, which is served to nurses from Shore and guests.

The group also collects items through the church congregation and is seeking new clothing (size preemie to 2T), diapers, knitted and crocheted clothing and blankets. The deadline for donations is May 10 at the church.

“It’s for any baby that goes home and their parents don’t have anything to take them home in,” Cross said.

She started the group after talking to a nurse at Shore Medical Center who told her they had to send a newborn baby home in the leather jacket of the mother’s boyfriend.

“When I heard that story, I just said that’s not right. That shouldn’t happen. And so I blew my stack to my husband, and he had said to me, ‘talking about it isn’t going to do anything, so do something about it.’ So that’s why we started to do this,” Cross said.

While the group meets at the church, members do not have to be part of the congregation to participate. In fact, several have joined through friends and many live outside the city.

After two decades, Cross continues to work hard at keeping the group productive “because I just feel it’s a good way to give back and to make people happy.”

She said one day she was in line at a local supermarket with a young girl and a new baby.

“I recognized the blanket that they had it wrapped in, because it’s a pattern that I’m the only one that ever uses, and so I asked her where she got it,” Cross said. “She said some ladies in the hospital gave it to her but that it came from somewhere else. I said, ‘you want to know where they came from?’ and then I told her and she got tears in her eyes and I got tears in mine. She said it was the only blanket she had.”

In addition to the annual Baby Shower, the group supports the Seamen’s Church Institute out of Port Newark through its Christmas at Sea donation drive, makes hats for indigenous children and lap robes for the veterans home in Vineland.

“The men and women who are on the big cargo ships around the world, they come into port and a lot of times they don’t have a chance to get off of the ship very often. So we provide them with hats and scarves and neck cowls and sometimes sweaters or slippers and ditty bags with puzzle books in there, cards, toiletries,” Johnson said.

– **STORY and PHOTOS** by **CRAIG D. SCHENCK**/*Sentinel* staff

