

## HELPING IN SANDY'S WAKE

by Rosemary Fajgier

It all started with a simple question on the President's Forum (the discussion group for ASG presidents). "Does anyone know if we have a chapter in the area where Hurricane Sandy hit or if we have members in that area?"

Being the president of the Princeton/South Jersey Chapter, I responded by saying that yes, our chapter did encompass much of the area that was hit by this superstorm. Then I proceeded to talk about what was going on in our area. My home, thankfully, was safe, but we were without electricity (and no generator) for eight days. Roads were blocked by downed trees. Schools, churches, gymnasiums, and other buildings were converted to shelters. School locker rooms were opened

so area residents without water or electricity could come in to shower.

As the days passed and electricity and phones were restored, I reached out to our members to ask if anyone was in need. Thankfully, instead of getting requests for help for themselves, they responded that they were already organizing to help others. Their churches set up shelters, food banks, clothing distribution centers, transportation, etc., and they were there to staff them.

People were so generous that places were turning away clothing because there just wasn't room to store it all. And as we moved from emergency to coping mode, people starting leaving the shelters to go to friends' homes, motels, and eventually to apartments and, if possible, their own homes. As

this movement began, we found a need that no one anticipated. When you arrive at a shelter with nothing and are suddenly given several days worth of clothing, where do you store it? How do you move it? When you are a sewer, you think "tote bags."

I happened to mention this need on the Forum and someone asked where they could send donations. I suggested the Red Cross and church organizations, and then gave my home address if this person couldn't get in touch with anyone else. OOPS!



Boxes that arrived on just one day!



Anne's car filled with totes and pillowcases.

In just a few days a small box arrived at my doorstep. It contained about 20 handmade tote bags. I immediately gave it to someone who was visiting the shelters.

The next day three more boxes arrived. These contained even more gorgeous handmade tote bags as well as the reusable store totes. These were also quickly delivered to a shelter.

Then each day, bigger and bigger boxes arrived. And there were more and more of them, arriving right up until Christmas Eve. Boxes arrived from chapters across the country—from Florida and Georgia on the East Coast to California on the West, from Wyoming in the North to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois in the Heartland, and other places in between. Some even came with no return address or

note inside. And what treasures those boxes contained! Besides the totes, there were blankets, scarves, hats, fabric, clothing, purses, wallets, backpacks, luggage, pillowcases, and most importantly, messages of love and concern. One chapter even offered to try to find gently used sewing machines if we had members who had lost theirs. I was overwhelmed!

It took hours and hours to sort through all the items sent. During those hours I was soooooo inspired by the beautiful fabrics, the creative

embellishments, and the gorgeous workmanship. I cried as I began to realize the time spent to produce these donations, not to mention the cost—donations to people they did not know and will probably never meet.

As the shelters closed and donations continued to arrive, I confided in my friend and treasurer

Helen Whitby that I was worried that I wouldn't be able to get the items to the intended recipients. She mentioned it to fellow member Anne Reilly who mentioned it to her church members. Immediately they responded that they were in desperate need of tote bags. Her church was one of many who delivered hot meals to those who were housed in motels. When the meals arrived in the church's delivery totes, the people would plead for them to leave the totes so they could use them instead of the plastic bags that kept ripping. Hearing this, we filled up Anne's car with totes and pillowcases for her fellow church members to distribute. The entire back of her SUV was filled, and this wasn't even half of the more than 600 tote bags and 300 pillowcas-

es I received.

As I write this, it is more than three months since Sandy blew into our lives here in New Jersey. While lives are not the same, people are starting to settle down into routines; and some of those routines are made a little easier because of the efforts of ASG members.

Those who stayed in motels told us how much nicer it was to have an attractive pillowcase of their own to use instead of the thin white threadbare ones from the budget motels. Now in apartments, some continue to use the pillowcases as bedding as well as for laundry bags or toy bags for the children. These items remind us daily of the thoughtfulness of people from around the country.

Sew, from New Jersey, we thank you, the very generous members of the American Sewing Guild who rallied together to help make our lives and the lives of those around us a little easier. While we may never meet, we will forever be connected by the thread of kindness you have shown to us.

*Rosemary Fajgier was one of the founding officers of the Princeton Chapter in 1994. She is currently in her third term as chapter president, but has previously served as vice-president, education chair, special events chair, and newsletter editor. She has also been an NG leader. In addition to ASG, she is president of the Friends of the Library in her hometown and teaches math at Burlington County College in N.J. Her true passion in life, however, is being with her granddaughters Dawn, age 8, and Lilly, age 2, who already love to work on Grandma's embroidery machine.*

