

# Wrapped in a Memory

T-shirts tell happy tales when stitched together

By Kris Grant



Quilt honoring James Shirey

When is a quilt a comforter? When its pieces are a collection of memories of a full and vibrant life.

After the sudden death of her friends' 14-year-old son, James, quilter Carol Willis had to do something to reach out. She had watched James grow up and as a mother she tried to imagine the pain of losing a child. She approached her friend, Sue Shirey, and asked if she could create a T-shirt quilt for the family out of James' favorite T-shirts. This quilt was something they could wrap around themselves, and it was a part of their son that would never leave them.

Sue Shirey embraced the idea. "James wore T-shirts every day and the thought of being able to wrap them around me was really comforting," she said.

Shirey checked in with Willis over the next several weeks as she sewed the quilt, carefully cutting the T-shirts into twelve-inch squares, then hand-tied the pieces. "We would tell stories about James and cry and you could really feel his presence as the quilt came together,"



James Shirey

Inset: A drawing of an angel James once painted has been incorporated in his memory quilt

Shirey said. For Willis, the process of creating the quilt was a spiritual journey, in which she sensed God's and James' presence as she trimmed edges and stitched seams. As she stopped at quilting shop to purchase backing material for James' quilt, she found herself short of cash at the register. A stranger came in, gave her two coupons that saved her 50 percent of the total purchase, then left as suddenly

as she appeared. Was it an angel? After finishing the purchase and returning to her car, Willis broke down and cried. Yes, she told herself, it was an angel.

Seeing first hand the healing powers of the quilt inspired her to launch Coronado Keepsake Quilts in January 2009 and on her website, [www.coronadokeepsakequilts.com](http://www.coronadokeepsakequilts.com), she shares the story of creating James' quilt, which she

titled "Quilt me a pathway to heaven."

Just about everything that is memorable on a local scale is captured in that ubiquitous piece of apparel known as the T-shirt. Did you participate in the June Low Tide Ride & Stride? Then you got a commemorative T-shirt. Participate in high school sports? Each one comes with a T-shirt. Planning on attending the 4th of July festivities? Better grab a Kippy's T-shirt!



Carol Willis and Sue Shirey

T-shirts...they're all around us, always there, until we move on in life and they slowly fade away. Willis says that doesn't have to be the outcome; quilts, she notes, are one of the most time-treasured keepsakes, handed down from generation to generation, much like the craft of quilting itself.

Willis is one of nine children raised in Bethesda, Maryland. Her father, John Oakley, is a watercolor artist and her mother, Terry Oakley, a creative quilter

and seamstress who sewed most of her family's clothing and several wedding gowns. Quilting is an art form that has been passed down through several generations of the Oakley family, traced as far back to Willis' great grandmother (and quite likely generations before). Willis has created dozens of quilts, first under the direction of her mother and then as a busy navy wife, working with her mother and the Bethesda Quilters Association.

Now Willis is passing the needle to her daughter, Sarah, a 7th grader at Coronado Middle School. Together they have created T-shirt quilts using Sarah's cheerleading T-shirts, one for her son, Jake, with surf and sport T-shirts, and another for her husband, Steve, a navy diver, using his navy T-shirts.

"My goal is to bring joy and lasting memories to others with a handcrafted custom keepsake," Willis says. "It's a business I can do from home and give back to the community in the process." She has raised funds for the local schools by donating custom quilts to the Coronado Schools Foundation Gala, Artisan's Alley, and the Harvest Hoedown. She donates a portion of the purchase price of each quilt to either the Warrior Foundation or the Coronado Schools Foundation, James Richard Shirey, Jr. Memorial Fund according to the wishes of the buyer.

Carol has made quilts for graduation gifts, military change of commands and anniversaries. "The feedback from friends has been wonderful," says Carol. "All those T-shirts from concerts, college, sports, or work are just sitting in people's closets. This is a great way to be able to use them and display them."

An average twin-size quilt runs \$300; prices increase approximately \$50 by size (double, queen, king) and additional number of T-shirts. ★