

Reallives

Weaving hope

Terry Helwig found a way to bring people together—one stitch at a time *by Jane Bianchi*

Shortly after September 11, 2001, Terry Helwig had an inspiration. “Our world is hanging by a thread,” she thought. “But maybe a thread is all we need.” As a gesture of unity, Helwig, 57, asked friends in her hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, to each donate a single thread to weave into a cloth.

There was just one problem: Helwig, who holds a master’s in counseling psychology, didn’t know how to weave. But that didn’t stop her. As she says, “Ideas come to the willing, not necessarily to the qualified.” And this was her idea: to encourage a compassionate community that would celebrate diversity and promote tolerance.

Helwig, along with her husband and her daughter, tied the first few threads together. Then a close friend, novelist Sue Monk Kidd, added ribbon from her daughter’s baby bootie, “to symbolize first steps.” When a weaver explained that they’d need about 50,000 threads to make one huge cloth, Helwig thought, “Oh boy, this could take 17 years.” But with help from a handful of well-connected thread ambassadors, the grassroots craft project grew. Church groups, book clubs, and schools held meetings to collect threads and share their special meanings. Some donors chose scraps (guitar strings, fishing lines, apron ties) that represented their own lives. Others honored loved ones (with a child’s shoelaces, the remains of a pet guinea pig’s blanket) or marked a new beginning (adding a strip of wedding veil,



Terry Helwig with two panels from her peace project

a graduation tassel). Thrilled, Helwig launched a Web site, threadproject.com, and began accepting contributions and thread stories from all over the globe.

By summer 2006, the project had evolved into seven enormous weavings that included fibers gathered from 70 countries and every continent, even Antarctica. The tapestries were installed at St. Paul’s Chapel, across from Ground Zero, for the fifth anniversary of 9/11; they’ll remain on display through the fall.

Monk Kidd says Helwig’s project is a metaphor for what is possible. “I remember when that little ball of thread could be held in your hand. What Terry’s done by following that thread sets a remarkable example. And that is something we can all take away.” ■