



Gerri Fleming works on her mat. — Photo by Danette Dooley/Special to The Telegram

# Choir’s fundraiser has grown into an art project without equal

By DANETTE DOOLEY  
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

Sheila Feaver runs her right index finger over a piece of grey material that she’s hooked into a rug to form the tongue of a Newfoundland dog.

Like all the other 23 mats that members of the Holy Heart of Mary Alumnae Choir are creating, Feaver’s rug tells a poignant war story.

“I have a nephew (Bradley Pierce) fighting over in Afghanistan right now. So I got some of his T-shirt and cut it into strips and used it for the tongue of the dog. So wherever these mats may be, there’ll bring Newfoundland memories,” Feaver says.

The dog in Feaver’s mat represents the Newfoundland Regiment’s Mascot during the First World War.

Sable Chief was presented to the regiment in April 1917 at headquarters in Ayr, Scotland. The dog would participate in marches held by the regiment, standing at attention at the playing of the Newfoundland anthem.

**Fundraiser**

The rug project was initiated earlier this year as a means of teaching members a new skill while raising money to help fund a trip to Beaumont Hamel in 2008.

Interested choir members were given an overview of the process and viewed a documentary entitled “I Remain, Your Loving Son,” by Bill Coultas and Bob Wakeham based on letters and memoirs between members of the Newfoundland Regiment and their families and friends back home.

After viewing the film, the choir held a one-day workshop to produce images on burlap and to begin to teach the women the fundamentals of rug hooking.

The women themselves decided what images they would create.

The group has met every Tuesday night since the end of March, 34 women working on 24 mats in the true Newfoundland and Labrador tradition of

using burlap and recycled materials.

The images on the mats pay tribute to Newfoundland soldiers of the First World War in particular and all soldiers in general.

In her mat, Gerri Fleming worked from a photo of her grandfather, Leo Terry.

“Mom didn’t have much to tell me about her father because, at that time, they didn’t speak much about what they’d been through in the war. I know he survived because he lived to have two boys and four girls,” Fleming says.

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“My grandfather is in the middle of the ruins of a brick building somewhere in Europe,” she says, picking up a strip of red fabric to work into the mat.

The photo Fleming is working with started out as a picture of her father’s brother, William Crotty, in his sailor’s uniform.

“My sister, Mary Messener — who is an alumna of Holy Heart — worked on the picture and sent it to my mom as a gift. I liked the image and wanted it to become my mat because it gave me a physical connection to the price my grandfather and others paid to keep our freedom,” Fleming says.

Barbara O’Keefe is hooking a set of four medals awarded to Staff Sgt. Maj. Cecil Green of Trinity.

“We took photos of them and then we put them on overheads and traced them out in black marker on burlap,” she explains.

Mary Anne Murphy and Frances Ennis drew inspiration for their rug from words written by a soldier named Howard Morry in July 1916 to his family back in Newfoundland.

“After the 1st of July, about the 6th, I think, we left for a rest and what a march that was. All our chums gone. We were just dragging along the road when Sgt. Maj. Hicks brought a couple of accordions and put one in front and one in the rear. They started up ‘The Banks

of Newfoundland’ and we all cheered right up.”

“For us, these words speak to the power of music to lift the soul even in the worst of times,” Murphy says.

Joan Dawe is chairwoman of the choir’s travel committee planning the trip to Beaumont Hamel.

Sixty-seven choir members will make the 14-day trip to Europe and will give numerous performances during their time there, she says, noting the women are paying about two-thirds of the cost of their trip out of their own pockets.

While the project began as a fundraising initiative, Dawe says because it now holds so much historical significance, rather than auctioning off the rugs individually, they would prefer to see them kept together.

The choir is now hoping to find contributors to purchase all 24 rugs which could be used for educational purposes to remind young and old alike about the tremendous sacrifice Newfoundlanders made and continue to make in the name of freedom.

“That’s our ultimate goal right now and we’ll be approaching a number of individuals and companies, including the provincial and federal governments, to see if they are interested in purchasing these rugs in bulk.”

Kevin Hutchings, honorary lieutenant-colonel of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, was recently invited to watch the women put the finishing touches on their rugs.

The powerful images that they recreate could certainly be used as an educational tool, particularly to recount the story of Beaumont Hamel, Hutchings says.

“I am absolutely blown away by the interpretations these women have come up with. They have really put their emotions into these mats. They are about as close to the truth as anything I have ever seen,” Hutchings says.



Gerri Fleming’s mat (from top) shows her grandfather Leo Terry. Barbara O’Keefe chose Staff Sgt. Maj. Cecil Green’s medals, while Sheila Feaver’s mat draws a line between the past and the present. Below, Mary Anne Murphy and Frances Ennis’s work in progress. — Photos by Danette Dooley/Special to The Telegram

