



A Stitch in Time

North Central blanket business is booming

By JoBeth Jamison

A funny thing happened on the way to retirement for North Central residents Mary Helen Hall and Michele "Mike" Menucci. Two years ago, the two longtime friends, like many newly retired people, sought a hobby; something to challenge them, keep them busy and nurture their "creative craft bent." Knitting seemed as good a challenge as any. So they went out looking for a knitting machine—because when you're retired you don't want your hobby to be too challenging—and, instead, they came home with brand new careers.

"We ended up with a digitized embroidery machine," says Hall. Since then, the former neighbors have been piecing together Conforta Quilts, a custom quilt company whose philosophy is "Quilting with comfort."

Plugged into a computer, their embroidery machine stitches just about anything the computer tells it to—graphics, logos, text—and it does it quickly, which is a good thing, given all the business Conforta has been generating. But embroidery is just a mere thread in the grand tapestry of their operation. They also have scanners that can print washable photos onto fabric.

When most people think of quilts, they think of the traditional, handcrafted, slightly sterile and time-consuming coverlets that are handed down through generations and are often considered works of art. Conforta's down-home



North Central resident Mary Helen Hall displays a quilt made from old University of Arizona T-shirts, put together by her company, Conforta Quilts (submitted photo).

quilts (and pillows) can also be considered works of art that are made for future enjoyment. However, where most traditional quilts are like a formal suit, Conforta's creations are more like a favorite pair of pajamas. Made with poly-fleece, flannel and cotton, the quilts are soft, warm, snuggly. With pictures of memorabilia and loved ones scanned right onto the fabric, they're also highly sentimental.

"We look at it as scrap-booking with quilts," says Hall, who, along with Menucci, has been able to take a lifetime of warm memories and roll them all into one warm "woobie." Conforta can make a blanket out of just about anything: from wedding photos to the water-stained napkin where you first wrote your phone numbers, or that ultrasound image that only you can

decipher, to a perfectly formed baby booty. They'll even take that teetering stack of souvenir T-shirts you just can't seem to part with and turn it into a

practical *pièce de résistance*—an idea that was perfected when they took Brophy Prep T-shirts from Menucci's son (without asking) and began assembling them into a quilt.

"One couple brought in 30 years of T-shirts, [from things they'd done and places they'd been] and said 'Do something with this,'" Hall laughs. The ladies, who've deemed the shirts "talking Ts," were only too delighted to fit the sentimental pieces of the couple's life into a single, soft keepsake. "It's a storyteller," she says.

Conforta does not have a storefront beyond its Web site (www.confortaquilts.com), the ladies prefer to come to you and get a feel for the finished product. Typically, customers set up an appointment for Menucci and Hall to gather the materials, along with some of the stories behind them. Conforta creates a design mock-up and e-mails it to the client to review.

"We get a lot of requests at graduation time for picture pillows and matching quilts," says Hall. Such creations often combine the image "patches," depicting a teen's life as a student, with school colors and T-shirts bearing the school mascot.

In addition to quilts and pillows, Conforta's "blanket operation" is branching out to other creative endeavors. The new Conforta Treasures specializes in custom party favors for corporate and private events, and off-the-wall gift items, including embroidered jewelry bags and tissue holders.

Depending on how elaborate and detailed the creation, or how much work is involved, Conforta's Quilts range from \$250 to \$500. Party favors and other "treasures" sell for \$15 to \$25 each.

For more information, call 602-997-8022 or visit www.confortaquilts.com.