

Giving Hearts, Willing Fingers - Flora Coffman



Flora Coffman at the 2019 Disaster Auction.

One of Flora's quilts.

Catherine Lantz and Flora Coffman at the 2019 Disaster Auction.

At age 102, Flora Coffman could be resting on her laurels, wrapped up in one of her many quilts, reminiscing about the dozens of sewing projects she has been a part of since 1980. Yet, she and her daughter, Phyllis Zimmerman, along with the remnants of the Women's Fellowship at Valley Pike Church, have donated countless quilted items to the Shenandoah District Disaster Auction for nearly three decades. How did someone with a such a giving heart and willing fingers get started?

Born in 1916, Flora grew up in Maurertown, and had her first introduction to quilting when she was nine years old. Her mother, Susie Gochenour, gave her a 9 patch project and told her to use really small stitches. Although she did not do a lot of quilting as a child, that early experience helped her learn to sew. Later, when she married Harold Coffman and moved to Northern Va., she made clothing for her and her daughters. Eventually, she started sewing for other people she knew. This laid the foundation for the unique way she would serve when she returned to the Shenandoah Valley.

Flora and her family moved back to Maurertown in 1977, but she really did not learn to quilt until 1980, when Dorothy Fravel and a few other women at Valley Pike Church worked with her on quilting projects. Since then, she says 46 quilts that she has worked on have been donated to the annual Disaster Auction. In addition, every member of her family has a special quilt that she has made. Flora says, "I was happy to do it! I am thankful I am able to still do what I can."

When a visitor walks into Flora's home, it is clear how important quilting is in her life. She became quite serious about the craft in 1987 when she purchased a beautiful quilt frame made by F. Rohrer of Dayton. She has it set up in her front room these days. It

has not always occupied the living room, but she says she has used this frame for over 30 years. It is hard to imagine how many quilts have come to life on its timbers. Today, her daughter Phyllis works closely with Flora, choosing the fabrics and planning the design. However, Phyllis (an excellent quilter in her own right) usually cuts the pieces and they machine quilt because, as Flora notes, "There's nothing wrong with that." Apparently there isn't because she has quilts on her beds that she would like to replace with something else, but she says, "They just won't wear out."

Through the years, people have developed an appreciation for her work. Son-in-law Roland Zimmerman observes, "Church members will go down to the auction and purchase her quilts." Helping raise money is just a part of Flora's disaster ministry.

"I have gone on trips with the teams [Disaster Ministry teams] many times and have seen the devastation," Flora remarked. She and her late husband, Harold, traveled with the Disaster Ministry team often. She recalls cooking for the team, but Roland reminded Flora that she did more than cook. In fact, she helped with drywall installation on at least one trip.

Reflecting on her time serving with the teams, Flora remembers, "One time I went to N.C. and we worked for a woman who was down in her basement scrubbing her clothes on a washboard and singing and praising the Lord. She gave everyone who worked on her home a woven basket that she had made. That was the best experience."

Unfortunately, not all victims of natural disasters show the gratitude this woman in N.C. displayed. Flora remembers working on a home where the family sat outside and watched the team clean up the mess. They didn't offer to assist with the reclamation of their own home. Although Flora believes that it doesn't matter if people are grateful for the work of the team, it does make it nicer when they seem to appreciate all the work. This is what the annual disaster auction is all about--supporting teams who are willing to help others regardless of their ability to participate in the rebuilding.

This positive attitude demonstrates the depth of Flora's compassion. It is a compassion borne out of her walk with Christ. Although Flora says all the Bible verses are important, one comes to mind as especially memorable to her: "And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). This seems like the perfect inspiration for someone who enthusiastically supports the District's Disaster Ministries.

Flora has not been on a trip with a team in a couple of years, but she still supports the mission--not only with her donations to the auction, but with her presence there. The only disaster auction she can remember missing was in 2004 when her grandson graduated from Virginia Tech. Even when she broke her foot a week before the 2018 auction, she still went on Saturday. Phyllis says they "look forward to the auction each year." Roland adds, "It's nice to be able to help in this way for those who need help recovering from disasters."

As this interview was coming to a close, Flora described two or three more ideas she has for next year's quilts to be donated to the auction. With the loving support of Phyllis, Roland and the remnant of the Valley Pike Women's Fellowship, it is likely her goals for the 2020 quilt auction will materialize.

Since this series of interviews focuses on the footsteps that lead others to believe, she was asked "What do you want people to remember about you?" In traditional Brethren fashion, Flora bristles at the question: "Nothing. I don't like all this publicity. I don't want anyone to think that I think more of myself than others. A lot of others have done more." Not only is Flora leaving the District the footsteps of service to follow, she has set the bar for the humility that must also be embraced when serving others in the name of Christ.

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Shenandoah Journal
May 31, 2019