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Personalized baby blankets are cherished for a lifetime

For a quarter-century now, the Baby Blanket Lady has been knitting covers destined to be keepsakes

May 09, 2009

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TORONTO STAR

Sometimes a baby blanket isn't just a baby blanket.

Sometimes it's a tie to the past that's never outgrown, a cherished keepsake.

Elaine Feferman, who's known as the Baby Blanket Lady, has been knitting – and knitting and knitting – personalized, cotton baby blankets for 25 years. About 6,000 of her colourful coverings have been welcomed by mothers, snuggled by babies, clutched by youngsters and treasured by teenagers.

About 10 years ago, Feferman received an unusual request from a friend, Dale Cohen of Toronto, who had received a blanket as a gift for her third baby. Now, she wanted to order one for her middle daughter, who was turning 16.

"The middle daughter always asked her mother why no one got a blanket for her" when she was born, Feferman recalls. The reason was simple: Feferman wasn't in the baby blanket business at the time.

But for her 16th birthday, Dani Cohen received from her family one of the Baby Blanket Lady's productions with her name stitched in it.

Cohen, now 26, says that even though she'd always openly coveted a blanket like the one her younger sister had, she "had no idea" that her mom would actually order one.

"C'mon, I was a 16-year-old and wanted a car," says Cohen, who works for a financial company in Toronto. "But that wasn't happening."

When she opened the package, she says, she reacted outwardly as any teenager might, to give the impression she was nonchalant about a pretty corny gift.



PAWEL DWULIT/TORONTO STAR

Dani Cohen, 26, finally got her own cover made by the Baby Blanket Lady when she was 16, after repeatedly asking her mother why she didn't get one when she was born. The answer? Elaine Feferman wasn't in the business then.

"I remember giving a teenage guffaw, but internally, I was pleased. It was a perfect gift. Now, I love that corny gift."

Not long after getting the blanket, Cohen moved to Ottawa to attend Carleton University. The blanket went with her. It went other places, too, including Vancouver, and it's still with her in Toronto.

Feferman, 57, hears that kind of story over and over. Parents will tell her that their kids take them wherever they go.

"Lots of kids take them to camp," she says. "Everyone thinks they are the only person who knows about them. When my niece went to camp, about six kids in the cabin had them. She couldn't believe it!"

Feferman, a former art teacher who took fine arts at York University and then studied textiles at what is now the Ontario College of Art and Design, started making the blankets when she was pregnant in the early 1980s. She had been painting on silk using French dyes that were toxic, and was looking for something non-toxic to do during her pregnancy.

She took a course in machine knitting at George Brown College, and, soon afterward, a cousin of hers became pregnant. She landed on the idea of knitting a blanket with the baby's name in it.

Feferman, now based in the rural St. Catharines area after years of living in Toronto, began doing the same for other relatives, and word started getting around, mostly in the Jewish community.

Now the word is plenty around, and Feferman's blankets have been sent to babies born all over the world – from Nunavut to Thailand to many parts of the U.S. and Europe.

For privacy reasons, she doesn't name names, but Feferman says there are famous rock musicians and even some NHL players whose children have her blankets.

And, of course, it's a small world. A woman called from a small town in Ontario to place an order. Feferman asked her how she knew about her blankets, and the woman said she'd seen one wrapped around a baby on a flight from Toronto to Florida and just had to ask the mother where it came from.

Despite the fact that a knitting machine is involved, "the process is low-tech," says Feferman. Once the customer chooses a colour scheme, and the stitches are cast onto the machine, "you still have to knit every row manually by moving the carriage back and forth." It must be set up for every row – for colour changes and for the letters of the names, which are programmed in using a computer. In addition to English names, Feferman can do Hebrew characters.

As the blanket is progressing, each row has to be examined carefully for irregularities in the cotton – knots or grease marks, for example – and ripped out and redone, if necessary.

Once the knitting is done, the edges of the blanket are crocheted by hand and the ends from the colour changes woven in.

The completed blanket is then blocked, boxed up, and ready to become a part of a child's life for years to come.

Just how big a part?

"I once had a call from people who were in California and their luggage was stolen. The blanket was in the suitcase. They called to ask me to make a blanket for when they got home because their daughter couldn't sleep without it."

Blanket making has become so much a part of her life, Feferman says, that she "can't be without it."

"I can't watch TV without a blanket to crochet."

The real reward is "hearing people tell me how much their kids love the blanket," and that the kids still have them when they're older.

Now, after 25 years, she's waiting for one thing.

"I still haven't had someone who got a blanket as a baby have a baby. Yet. It's just a matter of time."

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