

Crafters unite to make dozens of quilts for Eastern Kentucky flood survivors

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Fabric from an abandoned project to make curtains. A stack of flannel that was gathering dust. Scraps from children's quilts. All have been turned into freshly made quilts — for a cause.

Crafted by hand and machine, by veteran and novice quilters from Louisville and across the state, some 80 quilts should, within a year, find their way into the hands of Appalachian families who lost their homes in [the flooding of July 2022](#).



Susan Zepeda, a Louisville quilter, hatched the idea for the Appalachian Quilt Project earlier this year in partnership with the nonprofit [Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky](#).

The effort is intended to produce physical reminders of support, she said, but even more importantly keep the conversation going about the ongoing needs of the flood survivors.

“Quilting is a Kentucky tradition,” Zepeda said. “It’s a community coming together in a very Kentucky way to help people in Kentucky who are in need and to remind folks that they still need your dollars. They still need your attention. They need your care.”

Nearly 9,000 homes across 13 affected counties were damaged or destroyed in the floods, which displaced thousands of Kentuckians, according to an analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency data by the nonprofit think tank [Ohio River Valley Institute](#).

The quilts are slated to be given to the future residents of the Chestnut Ridge neighborhood near Hindman in Knott County. The foundation is working with several housing partners to build new homes on higher ground.



“We were short on homes even before the flood, and now it’s just exacerbated the problem,” said Kathy Allen, community engagement director with the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky. “It will be so special to the families and the individuals that receive the quilts just to know that someone cared enough to make the quilt, especially for them ... and want to see them get back into a house to get back on their feet.”

Zepeda brought the idea to [Louisville Area Fiber and Textile Artists](#), a visual arts organization of which she is a member, and the group voted earlier this year to embark on the quilting project.

At first, the group was aiming for 30 quilts. When they learned Chestnut Ridge would have nearly 60 homes, Zepeda said, the quilters weren't sure they would be able to meet the need.

As of late August, the quilt count approaches 90.

The effort was aided by the [STITCH \(Sewing Together in the Caring Highlands\) Program](#), within [Kentucky Refugee Ministries](#), which donated quilt tops and allowed the quilters to use their facility, sewing machines, and cutting tables for group work on the Appalachian Quilt Project.

Another spearhead of the project, Louisville quilter Pat Sturtzel, used her connections with fiber groups across the state, including the [Kentucky Heritage Quilt Society](#), to spread the word and rally support.

Sturtzel keeps a spreadsheet for the project, tracking where each quilt is in the assembly process and how many people have touched it.



The three layers of a quilt (the top, batting, and backing) can be made by different hands, with differently skilled crafters adding their personal touch to the homemade product. She estimates more than 60 people have lent their talents to the project, from Louisville to Danville to Bowling Green and Morehead.

Sturtzel can look at the quilts and rattle off the names and stories behind them. Take, for example, a red, white, and blue quilt with a star motif.

Zepeda bought the fabric stars at a yard sale years ago. Sturtzel designed the layout, another Louisville woman stitched those stars onto squares of fabric, another friend added sashing and the border, and that friend in turn took it to a quilting shop for quilting.

“Many different hands touched these quilts,” Sturtzel said.

The organization is also collecting what it calls “legacy quilts,” handiworks that are too old and fragile to throw over a sofa for daily use, but intricate and beautiful enough to be sold at auction as a fundraiser in partnership with the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky and The Foundation for Western Kentucky.

A groundbreaking for the first homes at Chestnut Ridge is planned for fall. Organizers plan to have the quilts on site as the construction project gets underway.

“It's important for them to know that they haven't been forgotten,” Allen said of the future residents. “They'll get a house, but this will help make it a home.”

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