

Celebrating Five Years of Clothing Angels

"We all have our personal reason for being here. Some may have suffered a loss of their own, and this is a good place to be. It's rewarding work." - Cindi Boukidis

On most days, the hall at the Greek Orthodox Church in central Fresno is reserved for church socials, men's groups, and the occasional crab feed. Today is "Angel Babies Day," and as has happened once a month for the past five years, the cafeteria-like space is temporarily converted into a garment factory.

Volunteers, led by the Athena Philoptochos Society of the St. George Greek Orthodox Church, gather and lovingly transform wedding dresses into burial gowns for infants and premature babies. This month marks the fifth anniversary of the St. George project. To date, the volunteers have donated more than 1,300 of the tiny gowns to the Hinds Hospice Angel Babies Program.

Candice Wilkins, Program Coordinator for Hinds Hospice Angel Babies, is thankful for the gowns. "We are so fortunate to have the St. George Greek Orthodox Church ladies as part of our Angel Babies volunteer team. The time and effort that they put into making the sweet gowns is priceless. When we provide our families with a special gown, handmade just for their precious one, we are helping to show our families that their baby is loved and remembered, and that the family is not alone in their grief."



On this day, thirty or so women of various ages and abilities are dispersed around circular tables piled high with fabric, yarn, beading, and supplies. Each of the tables in the cafeteria-like space is dedicated to a different task. Covering two of the tables are mounds of crisp white wedding dresses.



The lace, buttons, beading, sash, and other elements are being gently removed from the fabric by volunteers and sorted for later use. Nothing goes to waste. At another table, workers use cardboard stencils to trace patterns on the recovered fabric. "Some dresses with elaborate trains can yield 30 burial gowns or more," says Elaine Sotiropoulos. "We get gowns of all types. Some are home-made, some are

elaborate gowns costing thousands of dollars. What they all have in common is that they were special to someone, and now they will be special to new families who are suffering."

Amber Sweilem donated her dress shortly after her wedding. "Since I was a little girl, I dreamed of my wedding, especially my wedding dress. After my ceremony, I wasn't going to need it anymore. A lot of people have their dresses dry-cleaned and put in a



box. I didn't want that. I wanted my dress to go to a good cause. I couldn't think of a better place."



Cindi Boukidis and Elaine Sotiropoulos are co-founders of the program at St. George. Today, Cindi is the "garment factory supervisor," and it seems everyone has a question for her as work gets underway. "I get asked all the time, 'What do you want me to do?'" She laughs. "I tell them, 'You pick what you want to do. I want you to choose something rewarding to you.' There are

Left to right: Mia Papangellin, Marcia Taylor, Bess Pappas, Cindi Boukidis, Marie Antoniou and Elaine Sotiropoulos

all kinds of jobs. Most of the volunteers don't sew, and we always have lots for them to do.”

In addition to the gowns, the volunteers also make cloth diapers, knit caps, baby blankets, and cloth envelopes to hold hospital paperwork, as well as birth and death certificates. Much of the actual sewing and knitting is done off-site, and some of the seamstresses live as far away as San Diego.

As the work continues in the church social hall, the conversations are light and familiar. Most women sit in clusters of two or three, while others choose to work alone, quietly focusing on the task at hand. "This work is cathartic for some women," Cindi explains. "We all have our personal reason for being here. Some may have suffered a loss of their own, and this is a good place to be. It's rewarding work. I love the atmosphere." Sotiropulos adds, "We're all doing something together to help people in need, and we always share a special meal at the end of the day.”



The sewing program has grown to more than 100 volunteers. “There are women here from other denominations. Some aren't church-goers at all,” says Cindi. “Our mission is to help people in need, and we fill that need at an awful time for these families. We are grateful for our connection with Hinds Hospice. They are so important to our valley. Doing this work for Hinds gives our volunteers a community and a common goal. One of the worst things for a parent to do is to have to go shop for clothing to bury their child in. If we can help even a little, we've done our job.”



The St. George project is one of the many ways the Valley community supports the Hinds Hospice Angel Babies Program. If you would like to donate a dress or find out about volunteering, please contact the St. George Greek Orthodox Church at (559)233-0397 for more information. Gown donations may be made Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m. at the St. George Greek Orthodox Church, 2219 N. Orchard Street, Fresno, CA 93703.



Can you help the Angel Babies Program continue to care for families in need? Your donation will assist more than 300 families in Fresno, Madera, and Merced Counties each year. Please [CLICK HERE](#) to help, or call (559) 320-0308 for more information.

Through the Hinds Hospice Center for Grief and Healing, the Angel Babies Program provides services for families whose unborn child is diagnosed with a terminal condition. Because of you, the Angel Babies program is able to help as many as 300 families each year at little or no cost.

The program supports families during pregnancy and helps them to create memories. Support is also available for babies who survive after birth and are in need of special care. Comprehensive individual and group grief support programs are available to those who have suffered a loss. This includes families who have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth, or other infant death. If you would like more information about the Center for Grief and Healing, please log on to www.hindshospice.org, or call the Hinds Hospice Center for Grief and Healing at (559) 248-8579.

