

Sullivan man knits hats for fellow vets

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SULLIVAN — Bob Bolton once was a master woodworker. His able hands carved intricate train sets, birdhouses and cutting boards, but ultimately, it wasn't his hands that would fail him, but his legs.

About two years ago, the 93-year-old Sullivan man's legs started to give out on him, making it difficult for him to stand for long periods of time.

"I started selling my tools and spending most of my time in my chair," he recalled.

With uncooperative legs but a busy mind, Bolton's hands yearned for something to do.

At the time, Bob's wife, Betty, a longtime crocheter, was making knit hats on a loom. Bob decided it looked easy enough and soon was making hats of his own to fill the void left from his true passion — woodworking.

"I was knitting hats and he was watching me and he said, 'I can do that,'" Betty said.

And he did.

Using a round loom, Bob makes a hat by wrapping yarn around pegs on the loom in a circle. Each takes about 1,400 loops. When he first started, one hat took him about five hours; Now he can make one in about three.

Bob tries to make each hat a little different using several colors and patterns, of course, including both Green Bay Packers- and Wisconsin Badgers-themed caps. Made in two sizes to fit both adults and children, each hat costs about \$2 to make, though Bob said with a smile that his time is worth about \$30 an hour.

As one might expect, it was not long before the Boltons had more hats than they had heads to warm.



HATS OFF!

HATS OFF! — Bob Bolton, 93, of Sullivan, has taken up knitting since his legs keep him from his first love: woodworking. During the past two years, Bolton has donated more than 400 handmade hats to different charitable organizations, including the Jefferson County Veterans Services Office. For more photos, [click here](#). — Daily Union photos by Amy Wunderlin.

“We had piles of hats that we didn’t know what to do with,” Betty said. “We gave them to our grandkids, our great-grandkids, and we still had piles left.”

That’s when the idea of donating the hats came into play. Around this same time, Bob, a World War II veteran, took a trip to visit Washington D.C. monuments with the Honor Flight. His sponsor, Laura Gilberts of Jefferson, mentioned possibly donating the hats to Jefferson County Christmas Neighbors, the local charity that provides toys, hats, mittens, scarves, blankets and food for needy families across the county.

This year, the Boltens also donated hats to the Veterans Services Offices in Waukesha and Jefferson counties, because, as Bob said, veterans “deserve (hats) more than anyone else.” Additionally, they donated to patients undergoing chemotherapy and an organization for adults who are too old for foster care.

In addition, they also sold them at craft shows in Jefferson and Fort Atkinson to raise money for more yarn.

Altogether, Betty estimates that Bob has given away more than 400 hats during the past two years.

“The only reason I make them is for something to do,” Bob said. “I do four or five sudoku puzzles every day, a few crossword puzzles and then I run out of things to do.”

For a while, Bob was making a hat or two a day, but now he makes a few a week.

Jefferson County Veteran Services Office director Yvonne Duesterhoeft is one of the many people who has received hats from Bob. The past few months, her office has been handing them out to the local veterans it serves, taking a photo of each recipient. With the photos, Duesterhoeft compiled a scrapbook for Bob showing each veteran wearing one of his handmade hats.

“You have so many fans,” Duesterhoeft told Bob during a visit last week. “Your hats are now on the heads of every era of veterans that exist ... and also the kids of those vets. You are a celebrity, whether you know it or not.”

Duesterhoeft now has a waiting list of people looking to wear one of Bob’s hats.

“They’re beautiful hats, but I think part of what is so charming and heartwarming for people is to know a World War II veteran has endeavored to create them,” Duesterhoeft said. “We usually think of the little grandma knitters, but when they find out a guy who used to do woodworking has all of a sudden taken up knitting and he’s 93 years old, that is something special.”

Betty noted that this is somewhat of a change, because in the past, “if you wanted something from Bob, you had to buy from Bob.”

But Bob said he just doesn’t have any use for things anymore.

He doesn't think he will venture far from hats, however, as he tried making scarves and hated it.

"I make stuff for men," he added.

Bob was 21 when he served in the Army during World War II, from October 1942 through Christmas Eve 1945 — 70 years ago this Thursday. He served as a medic and first aid man in the Philippines and Okinawa.

The Sullivan veteran was awarded two Purple Hearts — one for an injury from a piece of shrapnel in his knee and another he could not recall. Bob also received two Bronze Star Medals for digging men out of trenches after a Japanese buzz bomb attack.

"I dug a couple of them out by hand, and my (commanding officer) said I deserved a medal for that," he said.

In addition, his unit was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, given to units of the United States Armed Forces, and those of allied countries, for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy on or after Dec. 7, 1941— the date of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and start of America's involvement in World War II.