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CREATING COMMUNITY



PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS: JEAN PIERI

Lee Christianson, also pictured below, sews doll clothes in her Montreal Avenue high-rise apartment last month. Despite her limited ability to speak, the former registered nurse was instrumental in establishing a sewing and crafts club that meets weekly in the building.

By starting a crafts club in her low-income high-rise, a resident helps chase away gloom.

By Christopher Snowbeck
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Fixing a broken clasp on a pair of men's trousers isn't the stuff of miracles.

But to Lee Christianson, the repair is just one example of the community spirit she's trying to stitch together in her St. Paul public housing high-rise.

Christianson, 62, lives in an 18-story building for elderly, disabled and low-income residents in the city's Highland neighborhood. After suffering a disabling complication related to throat surgery, Christianson found herself plunged into a downward spiral that included the loss of her apartment, her car and her nursing career.

Ultimately, she found hope by creating a crafts club that meets weekly for sewing,

fellowship and the occasional clothing repair. With a sturdy sense of humor, Christianson says, the club has helped her clear the gloom from a life of greatly changed expectations.

"Maybe that's what helps with depression," she said during a recent craft club meeting. "Just stay busy."

It's a good message that can help others, said Charisse Brown, a housing manager with the St. Paul Public Housing Agency, which operates the Montreal Avenue high-rise near West Seventh Street.

"A lot of times, people in the high-rises don't have enough to do," said Brown, who worked there a few years ago when the crafts club was getting started. "It was a

CRAFTS CLUB, 12A >





Marlene McIntosh, left, and Lee Christianson talk about their sewing projects in the community room of their Highland Park apartment complex. The crafts club has dabbled in everything from quilting to making candy bouquets.

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A CLUB IS BORN

> Crafts club

good thing for building relationships among residents."

"She's very patient ... and very reliable," Brown said of Christianson. "She is a very helpful person and a very good communicator."

Communication doesn't come easily for Christianson.

When she talks, Christianson must place a finger over a hole in her throat to make sound.

After what was meant to be a relatively simple operation in 2005 to remove a goiter, Christianson said, she awoke in the intensive care unit and remembers being told that without a tracheotomy, she would have died.

Details of what happened in the operating room are in dispute. Christianson has filed a lawsuit against her surgeon in the case, and the doctor denies liability.

Whatever the cause, the only way Christianson can breathe is through the surgical hole in her throat, and she can't talk and breathe at the same time.

Nursing involves a lot of hands-on work. That's not possible, Christianson said, when you're constantly putting a finger to your throat just to talk with people.

"I really hated to quit working, but ... I wouldn't be good to anybody," she said. "When I first moved in here, I thought: This is the dumbest life on the planet."

A few months after Christianson came to the high-rise in 2006, a woman fell to her death from an upper floor in what police investigated as a possible suicide. To Christianson, the incident symbolized her own desperation.

"The first two years I was here, I wouldn't even come downstairs except to go out to the store or take my garbage out," she said. "I wouldn't talk to anybody. I wouldn't participate in anything."

Then one day, Christianson saw another resident sitting in a common room doing embroidery.

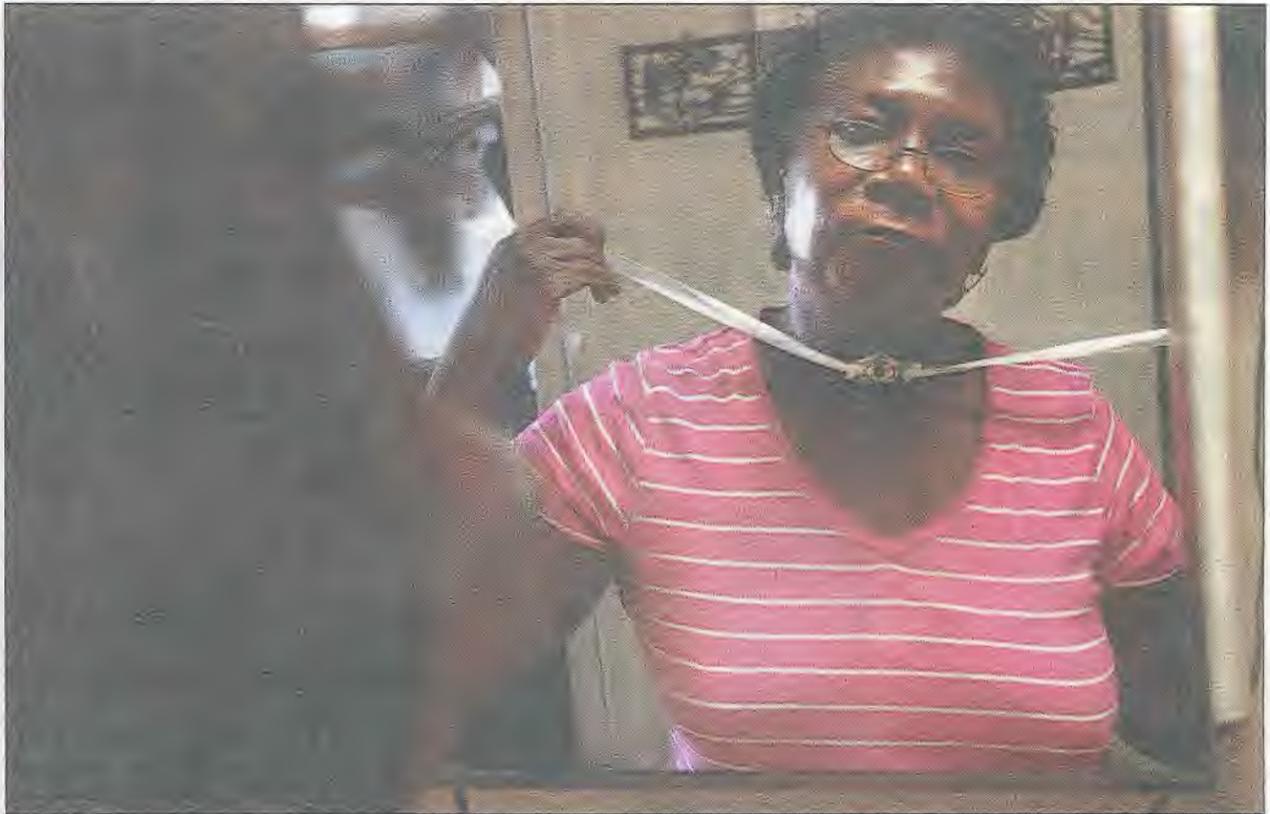
She hadn't touched her craft work in years, Christianson thought.

The women started talking and decided to begin a craft club, thinking others in the building might enjoy working together on crafts or learning how to do so.

Before her surgery, Christianson's retirement dream was to make and sell doll clothes. So, it was natural that one of her club projects would involve making outfits for American Girl dolls.

Christianson used to give the outfits to the Salvation Army, but now she makes them so other women in the high-rise have gifts for their grandchildren. She knows from experience that grandparents sometimes need such enticements.

"We can't get our grandkids to visit us — they say we're boring," Christianson joked during a club meeting earlier



In what is a daily procedure, Lee Christianson cleans her tracheostomy tube and re-inserts it.

PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS: JEAN PIERI



Lee Christianson puts a ribbon on a newly finished doll's dress. She makes the doll clothes for other women in the high-rise to give to their grandchildren.

this month.

As Christianson talked about why she thinks others in the building sometimes struggle with depression, she returned to the generational theme: "The kids don't need us anymore; the grandkids don't, either. And the great-grandkids get on our nerves

— we don't have the kind of energy that they want!"

The recent club meeting was a relatively small affair in the building's first-floor common room. Conversation meandered from talk of the holidays to recipes for peach cobbler.

Over the years, the club has

dabbled in everything from quilting to making candy bouquets. But residents like Vojin Besarabic — a 40-year-old who stopped by with a broken clasp on his trousers — know of the club as a reliable place for getting clothes fixed.

"Thank you so much," Besarabic said, after Chris-

tianson finished the job. "God bless you."

Some residents never learned to sew and need help with such fixes — sometimes because they are widowers whose wives used to handle the repairs, Christianson said.

Others can't see to thread a needle anymore. She confessed, though, to being a little amazed at how some "got to be this age and couldn't put a hem in."

Someone needs to provide help with repairs, Christianson said. But what she really loves about the club is using her sewing machine to create things — whether it's crafts or community.

"Starting the craft club gave me some kind of purpose," Christianson said. "When we got together and started doing this, it was good for everybody."

"I always felt good when I was sewing ... when I was creating something," she added. "I'm amazed at how many people can't sew, but that's OK, because it gives me something to do."