

The Fabric of Community

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Social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic may amplify feelings of loneliness. For people confined to assisted living facilities or incarcerated, isolation can be devastating to mental and physical health. Connecting to life beyond four walls through four sides of a screen or the four corners of a window can only do so much. Tactile mail is immediate and personal. A letter or card is held by the sender thinking of the recipient. The recipient is reminded of the sender. They have both held it, felt its texture, read the message and looked on the images. They share an experience. If that correspondence is a work of art, all the better.

Part of the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Art for Life Program* included an instructional lesson on quilted [greeting cards](#). Viewers learn to compose the cards using traditional quilting patterns (star, block, rail, etc.) out of pieces of cloth. Most include a theme or idea that connects the sender to the receiver. The cards are then sewn. They commonly employ folk art style, nature symbolism and short narrative. Like heirloom quilts, cards invoke ideas of comfort, family, and community.

Art for Life Program creator Troyd Geist explained that loneliness from isolation has a direct impact on health. The process of creating and sending these cards prompts the use of long-term memory, small group and interpersonal communication and fosters a sense of connectedness. For people living in facilities, social and cognitive engagement is especially important. Ultimately, the cards benefit the maker, the sender and the receiver because

they prompt discussion in the living environment and among family members who may live farther away.

Seeing the need to reach out to those who may feel more isolated than usual due to the pandemic, a local group created a pen pal program to inspire resiliency. Members were challenged to create personalized cards for recipients they did not know.

One member created quilted greeting cards. How could one personalize the card? She thought about the universal desire for strength and freedom. For each card, she selected a symbol, included a song lyric or quote and a simple, personal story. She used imagery of birds, flowers, butterflies, and the prairie to spark ideas of movement, the future and broad horizons. For example, in a horse-themed card, she included the story of how, as girls, she and her sister ran around the family's farm all day as if they were horses. In an owl-themed card, she introduced the recipient to "Olly" an abandoned owlet nurtured to maturity by her family. She playfully referenced the lyric, "I will owl-ays love you."

"I wanted each person who gets a card to look at it when they needed a boost and to know somebody cared."

The first recipients were pleased with the cards and more are underway. After the initial receipt of the card, they can become a keepsake. They may be set aside for a time but they can also be framed, reread and remembered. Like many quilts, the stitching is a clear, lasting reminder of the care taken to create it and ties the artist to the audience--an audience of one who knows they are not alone.

