



Giving orphan dolls—and their Alzheimer's patient parents—a new lease on life

by Robin Redmond, Writer-Editor

Considering putting your daughter's old dolls in a garage sale this summer? Well, there's a better way of finding a new home for those dolls. Donate them to the Care and Share program. This program, which is run by the Ottawa Doll and Collectors Guild, delivers baby dolls to long-term care patients in residences around the city. These dolls have been giving these patients—particularly those suffering from Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia—something to nurture and love.

Seven years ago, Guild member **Renée Gauthier** came up with the idea for the Care and Share program after a neighbour had come over to see her doll collection. The neighbour, who worked in a long-term care centre, explained to Renée how many of the residents seemed to enjoy cuddling with the centre's clinical doll and how it was a shame that there was only the one doll available. Touched by the story, Renée decided to round up any suitable dolls she could and donate them to the centre—and so the program was born.

Since the program began, the Guild has collected, cleaned, repaired, dressed and placed over 300 baby dolls with elderly patients across the city. The program is a community service provided by the Guild and the members personally undertake all costs associated with repairing or cleaning the dolls, so as to not burden the participating facilities.



Some of the dolls delivered to residents' by the Care and Share program.

Photo: Marjorie Hannam.

Although there has been no scientific proof that presenting Alzheimer's patients with dolls can improve the patient's clinical state, studies have shown that cuddly dolls seem to alleviate a patient's distress and eases his or her withdrawal from society. The patients forge an emotional bond with the dolls, sometimes allowing for past nurturing or parental memories to emerge, and thus giving them something to talk about with residence staff and visiting family members.

"When a patient has something that they can own and be responsible for, it facilitates communication" explains Statistics Canada's own **Anne Taller**, current President of the Ottawa Doll and Collectors Guild, "We can't prove it scientifically, but we know by experience that the program works."

Caring and sharing

And with more and more residences requesting dolls for their residents, evidence certainly seems to suggest that the Care and Share program is proving beneficial to long-term care patients.

Renée, Anne and **Marjorie Hannam** (another Guild member) had many interesting stories to tell of their experiences with the program and the successes they have had.

Renée told one story of a woman who was a 100 years old and who had never been given a doll in all her life and was just so delighted by the gift. "It's very emotional, but very rewarding for us to see how the patients react," Renée adds.

Anne agrees, "All the stories here are tinged with sadness, but when you think of the comfort these dolls bring to both the patients and their families, you realize how important [the project] is."

A surprising fact is that it is not only female patients who take comfort in the dolls, but men as well. "We usually give the bigger, heavier dolls to the men," Marjorie notes, "They find the dolls as soothing as the women do."

Some patients understand that the doll is in fact a toy and simply enjoy having something cuddly of their own to care for, while others often believe that the doll is in fact their child and take great measures to ensure their 'baby' is well cared for.

"One woman insisted that her baby needed its own bed and carriage," Renée says, "so the staff at the residence pooled their money together and bought a toy crib and carriage. That woman died with her doll in her arms."

Attachment to the dolls can be so strong that patients will refuse to fall asleep until their 'babies' are asleep. Guild members remove noisemakers from the dolls to prevent patients from being confused by unfamiliar sounds (such as crying or giggling) at night. When one patient would not sleep with the doll in her bed for fear of rolling onto it during the night, staff members provided a basket so the doll could remain at her owner's bedside.

Because of the patients' attachment to the dolls and the comfort they have brought them, families are welcome to take the dolls home and keep them once the patients have passed on.

The Care and Share program has had such a successful start in the Ottawa area that the idea was picked up at an international doll convention that Marjorie attended in Dallas. Intrigued by her story and the benefits witnessed by the Guild members, doll enthusiasts from as far away as Mexico, Australia and Russia have shown interest in pursuing similar programs in their local areas.

"It really is a very simple and very inexpensive community service project to do," Marjorie explains, "It's a great activity for church groups, youth groups and sororities to get involved in."



Ottawa Doll and Collectors Guild members, Anne Taller and Marjorie Hannam, and Care and Share Founder, Renée Gauthier. Photo: Robin Redmond.



Care and Share dolls in matching sleepers and receiving blankets. Photo: Marjorie Hannam.

Since the Guild operates this program without a budget, the dolls generally make their way to the doll doctors via garage sales and thrift shops (such as Value Village) or donations from supporters like Prices Division's **Kathy Purcell**. Guild members then sort the dolls, choosing those soft-bodied baby dolls that are ideal for the Care and Share Program. These dolls are then cleaned and dressed in real infant clothes—including flannelette diapers—that have also been found at thrift stores or hand-sewn or knitted by the Guild members.

Homes are still found for those dolls that are not suitable for the Care and Share Program. Fashion dolls, plastic walking dolls, cabbage patch or tiny baby dolls are donated to women's shelters or refugee centres where children can play with them or adopt them as their own. A shipment of these 'other' dolls will soon be sent to underprivileged children in the Northwest Territories.

The Ottawa Doll and Collectors Guild

The Guild, which has about 30 members, is a club for doll enthusiasts of all kinds, including doll collectors, doll makers and those who are simply interested in learning about dolls. Members' interests range from paper dolls to antique porcelain dolls to Raggedy Annes to Barbies, and the group meets on the second Tuesday of every month at 7:30 p.m. at the Nepean Museum (16 Rowley Avenue, Nepean) to discuss their collections, attend talks on the histories or cultures of dolls, or participate in hands-on workshops. New members are always welcome to attend the meetings.

For more information on the Ottawa Doll and Collectors Guild or the Care and Share program, or to donate a doll, please contact Carolyn Wells at the Nepean Museum 16 Rowley Ave., Nepean ON, (613) 723 - 7936 or by email at educationservices@nepeanmuseum.on.ca. She will forward your message to the appropriate guild member.

An ideal doll for the Care and Share program...

- ...is a soft-bodied, baby-sized doll
- ...has a bald head or features moulded hair (for sanitation purposes)
- ...has eyes that are open or that open and close.