

Giving Meaningful Gifts

It's always a delight to bless those you love. Now you can increase the pleasure by choosing items with spiritual significance.

Several gift businesses and gift lines born from tragedy or overwhelming circumstances have been turned into ministries by people who have the vision to help others survive what they've lived through. Gifts produced by these companies are tools used to encourage humor, healing and remembrance of a loss. And these are just the tip of the iceberg in inspirational products.

HUMOR FOR THE HEART

Sometimes reasons to celebrate are readily apparent; other times one has to look for them, as Sue Buchanan did when she triumphed over breast cancer 18 years ago. Her experience is chronicled in her book, *I'm Alive & the Doctor's Dead*.

Since this experience Buchanan has attempted to find something to celebrate in every situation, and she uses her speaking engagements, books and a new greeting card line to inspire people everywhere to do the same.

"I've been through dreadful things, and that gives me credibility to talk about a lot of subjects that we haven't talked about as Christians," Buchanan said. Her latest book, *A Party Begins in the Heart* (W Publishing), also is the title for her line of 25 greeting cards from Lawson Falle.

The line, set to debut this fall, covers topics such as varicose veins, hot flashes, PMS and chemotherapy in a humorous way. The card line features a woman who has "piled-up hair [and] green eye shadow and who is always pointing her finger because she has a point to make." Each card includes Scripture.

"The cards probably stretch the boundaries, but we address real-life issues," Buchanan said. "I'd like to see people belly laugh, not just chuckle."

COVERED IN PRAYER

It never dawned on Marla Branch when she started her line of keepsake prayer quilts that one of the first products she would need to make would be for her own daughter, whom doctors feared faced a life-threatening illness. Gifts of Grace, based in San Diego, Calif., focuses on prayers for ailing parents, newborn babies, young adults headed to college or friends in need.

Each prayer quilt, called the Comforter, incorporates Scripture, hand-tied prayer knots and personalized prayer squares to remind family and friends to pray for the quilt's recipient. Each has seven squares with Scripture, an outline of a cross formed by satin ribbon and a satin border.

Marla's four children ages 2 to 18 and her husband, Ernie, all pray over the quilts before they are mailed to the recipients. Ernie—like several people who have worked on the quilts—has become a born-again Christian as a result of the quilt ministry.

Although the quilts are available for purchase, Branch gives away many quilts to people with special needs. She is in the process of sending 29 quilts to an orphanage in the Philippines.

"Our family is committed to pray for every person [who] receives a quilt," Branch said. "We tell the children who the quilt is for and why they are receiving it."

The company that started with just scraps of cloth now offers a line of quilts that consists of more than 35 styles for babies, children and teen to adults. The "Hope" collection is for those who are ill or in special need. The "Faith"

collection is for the person who is entering a new phase of life such as that marked by graduation. The "Love" collection is for those who are celebrating special occasions such as the birth of a new baby or a birthday or who are deserving of a special "thank you."

On the other side of the country, in Panama City, Fla., Nanette Hitchcock had an idea for a company and a line of products that would celebrate one of the greatest honors of life—being a mom. At the time this idea was born, she was an overwhelmed mom of two boys 15 months apart, and it was not the time to begin a new business.

However, the idea stayed alive, and in 1999 Moms at Play was formed as a way to celebrate the various roles moms play, with lines such as Taxi Mom, Soccer Mom and Praying Mom. The Praying Mom line includes four shirts, a hat, Bible covers and a tote bag. The company will add a book bag and journal in the next couple of months.

"Praying Mom has been the No. 1 seller in the South," said Hitchcock, now a mother of three. "It has been a blessing to see that there are so many moms out there who want to let people know that they are a mom, but more importantly that they are a praying mom."

The company's Web site contains a mom-to-mom section that encourages women to leave comments or questions.

THE GIFT OF LIFE

Alda Ellis is hoping to extend the success she's found as a businesswoman, wife, mother and author to her new role as philanthropist with a mission for promoting breast cancer awareness. Since losing her mother to breast cancer, Ellis has been passionate about educating and reminding women of all ages about the causes and effects of breast cancer.

Through her company, Alda's Forever, Ellis has created a

"Friendship for the Cure" Friendship Ball that contains a message encouraging a friend to take care of herself because she is special. A French-milled soap with a reminder to get a yearly mammogram and a pink body sponge is inside the silver ball. The company sends \$1 from every ball sold to a breast cancer charity. To date more than \$60,000 has been raised.

"I have based the spirit of our company on doing all the good we can in all the ways we can for all the people we can, and humbly, I am the one most blessed," Ellis said.

This year the company introduced a pink ribbon pin to remind women to be aware of breast cancer prevention.

KEEPING MEMORIES ALIVE

In 1994, Doug and Debbie Heydrick experienced the loss of their unborn child, Julia. Out of a desire to allow God to work their pain and loss together for good, the couple started Angels in Heaven Ministries as a way to comfort parents who have suffered the loss of a child through miscarriage, stillbirth and early infant death.

At the heart of the nonprofit ministry is a keepsake Doug made for Debbie following her miscarriage: a 5-by-7-inch brass, hinged double frame called "Little Footprints." The keepsake contains a poem, a generic set of footprints and the words "In Memory of Our Precious Baby."

Two new keepsakes are also available: "The Gift of You" for those healing from a regretted abortion and "In Loving Memory of You" for the loss of any loved one. The abortion recovery keepsake is being offered by Focus on the Family to Crisis Pregnancy Centers for use in their Abortion Recovery Classes as a closure gift for the mothers who complete the class.

"These women and men are not a lot different from me," Heydrick said. "They are waiting to see their baby in heaven. The keepsake is a healing tool."

The Plano, Texas, ministry has set up a toll-free line that, although not manned 24 hours a day, provides someone for callers to talk to about loss. A Web site is also available that offers advice on what to say or do when a friend has experienced a loss.

“There [are] not a lot of things that validate life in the womb,” Heydrick said. “We tell people to view [their] loss as a stepping stone to ministering to others. God will comfort you, but you can’t stop there.”

The items mentioned here are only a few of the different types of gifts available on the market today that have special meaning because of their spiritual significance. Most Christian bookstores carry a variety of products that make a statement about one’s faith and have keepsake quality. Who of us would not be touched by a Thomas Kinkade painting, for example, or a Precious Moments figurine celebrating some memorable occasion in our lives?

The next time you find yourself shopping for a gift, think inspirational. You’ll be amazed what an impact your thoughtfulness can have.

Rhonda Sholar is the former managing editor of Inspirational Giftware magazine.