

Compassion through “PLARN”



To state the obvious, sleeping outdoors in Michiana is not a pleasant experience. Depending on the time of year, homeless people have to deal with frozen slush, sloppy mud, soaking rain, scorching heat, or a combination of those woes, when they search for a place to rest. Now, a few of our homeless brothers and sisters have received a partial remedy to their problem through a gift of handmade sleeping mats woven from a most unusual material: “PLARN,” or yarn made from plastic shopping bags.

Each month the W.I.N.G.S. (Women In God’s Service) group at St. Bavo Parish in Mishawaka looks for a service project to help people in our local community. When they heard about these sleeping mats made from plastic bags, it seemed like a great project, but one that they could not do on their own. A single mat, measuring 72 x 36 inches, requires 600 to 700 standard grocery bags. Each bag needs to be carefully flattened and cut into four horizontal strips, with the handles and bottoms removed. All of those strips, which are actually 2-inch-wide loops, need to be knotted together to form a continuous chain of “plarn.” Then, all of that plarn must be crocheted into a mat, very much as one would weave a blanket out of regular yarn. The final step is to fold the mat in half and roll it up and then crochet ties to hold it closed and a strap to carry it over one’s shoulder. The ladies of W.I.N.G.S. watched an instructional video on YouTube and decided that it would be worth the effort, if they could enlist enough help from their fellow parishioners.

Throughout the month of April, plastic bags flowed in by the thousands. Some people dedicated themselves to smoothing and cutting the bags into strips. Others tied the strips together to make the plarn. Others crocheted the plarn into mats. By the end of the month, the W.I.N.G.S ladies had completed twelve mats. (That represents roughly 7,200-8,400 plastic grocery bags!)

As the work was progressing, some of the W.I.N.G.S ladies went to Our Lady of the Road Outreach in South Bend to seek advice about how and where to distribute their mats once they were done. They brought along a sample, thinking that the idea of a sleeping mat made from used grocery bags may not appeal to anyone. But, as they began their spiel, they were quickly interrupted with, “Are you kidding us? We’ve been wanting to learn how to make these for months!” Then they turned around to see a woman sitting on the ground across the parking lot, yelling, “Can I have one of those? I’ve been wanting one forever.” What joy! They left the mat with her and returned home praising God for using them as His instruments to serve the poor!

At the end of April, the W.I.N.G.S. ladies gathered at a weekday Mass and brought eleven more completed mats to have them blessed by their Pastor, the Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C. His prayer was that those who would rest upon the mats would know God’s love for them and feel that their human dignity was being recognized and honored, as is fitting for all children of God. The mats were delivered to Our Lady of the Road amid many thanks from the homeless. All eleven mats were claimed in about ten seconds. Praise the Lord!

