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## Local & State Headlines

### Bears make 'grieving easier'

- Albany Community Hospice's "Memory Bears" help family members cope with their loved ones' deaths.

Joshua Brown

ALBANY — When her husband, Nate Johnson, died earlier this year, Heidi Johnson realized that he still held a very strong presence with her.

In the process of getting rid of his clothes, she found she had difficulty because of the mental connection she made between him and his clothing.

"You attach them to their clothes. I've noticed that since he left," she said in a recent interview.

But thanks to a teddy bear made from her late husband clothing, Johnson says she is better able to cope with his death.

"It's like having a little piece of him," she said. "It's a comfort.

"I think it makes grieving a little easier — it's hard to explain."

Nate Johnson, a Cooper Tire employee, was diagnosed in March 2006 with cancer and underwent chemotherapy for several months. He died in September after a 19-month battle.

The bears, which volunteers call "Memory Bears," are sewn together by one of Albany Community Hospice's five project volunteers. The group began making the bears after a Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital employee found a need and began making the project.

The hospice's former volunteer had become ill and couldn't continue the project, so Lynda Chancey took on the volunteer's responsibilities, sewing about 25-30 bears in one month, Hospice Volunteer Coordinator Jessica Norman said.

After Chancey began sewing the bears and word spread about the project, several others decided to help out, Norman said.

"The biggest thing we saw after a loss is it's kind of a hard thing for people to let go of the clothes," she said. "But this is a way ... they can let go of some of those clothes and still cherish something.

"It certainly offers them a great deal of comfort."

The program originally started after Sept. 11 for military families. Chancey restarted the program about a year ago and kept it going single-handedly until early spring.



The five hours it takes to sew one of the bears together might seem demanding, but Chancey says she doesn't mind sacrificing her spare time to make them.

"Well, I think ... if I can help somebody, it's well worth it," she said.

"It keeps me off the streets," she added with a laugh. "You know, idle hands."

The hospice had about 10 requests for the memory bears in November, which is about average, Chancey said.

While most of the material is provided for the bears by family members, she occasionally has to dip into her personal stash of arts-and-crafts materials to finish the bears, she said.

Chancey said she had never done this particular bear pattern before, but she's had plenty of experience sewing other stuffed animals. The memory bears project has become such a part of her life, she says, that her two teenage children have gotten used to her asking for button-eye and other accessory suggestions for the bears.

"I'll call them and ask them if these eyes look better or these eyes look better," she said.

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