

A CHRISTMAS GIFT FOR 'MRS. BETTY' LONG

First Graders Say 'We Love You' With Hand-Painted Quilt

BY SUSAN USHER

For nearly 30 years Betty Long has showered her first grade students at Waccamaw School with love and encouragement.

Last week it was their turn. Mrs. Long started the school year at Waccamaw Elementary School, then took leave to undergo six hours of surgery Oct. 6 to remove an uncommon cancer of the cartilage, Chondro sarcoma, and replace her left femur, between hip and knee, with an artificial bone.

Last Wednesday morning she visited her class for the first time since surgery and the start of a long recuperation period. Mrs. Long arrived on her walker, and soon settled into the wheelchair positioned by her husband, O.J. "Jack" Long.

Youngsters surrounded "Mrs. Betty," eagerly and lovingly trading hugs and news, showing off their skills as new readers.

When she invited students to share with Mrs. Long what they had been "working on," interim teacher Carla Bass thought for a moment she had blown it. "But not our surprise," she hastily cautioned.

The suspense escalated as youngsters glanced mischievously at "Mrs. Betty," but held their tongues.

Singing "We Wish You A Merry Christmas," the first graders presented Mrs. Long with what she immediately named her "love quilt."

"Would you mind if I put this quilt on my husband's bed so everyone can see it?" she asked.

The class had been looking for something special to give Mrs. Long, who's known for dispensing plenty of hugs, kisses and praise, reading aloud from a rocking chair in a corner of her room, and sketching every student in her class each spring and gives their parents the pictures.

"We thought about sending flowers, but then the idea of the quilt came to me in one of those middle-of-the-night brainstorms," said Bass, one of Mrs. Long's former students and fellow teachers who returned in October to take over the class on an interim basis.

The project came together quickly, the best-kept secret in the Waccamaw school and community.

Using pastel fabric paints, either their own handprints or various stencils designed by art teacher Sonia Johnston, each student created a quilt square and signed it.

Career exploration teacher Amy Mintz pieced the squares together, and Marilyn Inman, whose son Michael is in Mrs. Long's class, added the border, filling and packing.

Using long strands of candy pink yard and a little help from Mrs. Bass and teacher assistant Dorothy Frink, students knitted the quilt top to the back. Along with their artwork each square featured a special message for Mrs. Betty: "Get well," "I love you," "Get some rest," and "If you need me, I will help you."

As each student pointed out his or her square and read their message, slow tears trickled down Mrs. Betty's smiling face.

"Rest? I've had enough of that to last me for years," she told the children. "I love you, too. You don't know how much I've thought about you."

The class, which Mrs. Long describes as "a very loving and sweet group of children," hadn't forgotten their start-of-the-year teacher.

Since October, they've sent cards, letters and even a book, "Stone Soup," to share. Mrs. Long answered each note individually.

Former students have also kept in touch, with second grade classes, for instance, sending jokes to cheer her recovery.

Mrs. Long was the young mother of children ages 2, 3 and 9 when she decided to fulfill her ambition to become a first grade teacher. She and her husband temporarily moved to her hometown of Whiteville, which made it easier to commute to classes at Pembroke State University.

She went "on the excitement plan," she says. It took dedication and the support of her family, but in just two years and nine months, Mrs. Long had her degree.

Her first and only teaching post to date has been at Waccamaw School. "We moved back on Friday and I started teaching Monday," she recalled.

Mrs. Long has always wanted to teach, specifically first grade.

That burning desire came from her own experiences.



STUDENTS PROUD of their handiwork look on expectantly as Betty Long unfolds the quilt, with its cheery messages from each child in her first grade class.



INTERIM TEACHER CARLA BASS (left) holds the yarn while Luis Campos ties a double knot.



CLASSMATES WAIT their turn as Michael Ingram helps put finishing touches on a "love quilt" for their teacher, Betty Long.

Her first teacher "kept the class frightened to death," she recalled. Later, when other teachers provided a better example, she promised herself, "When I am a teacher, I will never humiliate a child." To her knowledge, she hasn't.

Back when she began teaching there was no kindergarten in the Brunswick County Schools and in rural Ash, most children came from home to school, with no preschool program in between.

"I got them first," she said, "and I've always tried to love and encourage them, to make them feel good about themselves."

These days aren't spent in the classroom, but in self-assigned homework: recovery. Mrs. Long goes to physi-

cal therapy three times a week and exercises at home other days, working to strengthen the remaining muscles in her left thigh where the abductors have been removed and around her knee joint.

A snug plastic brace supports her new hip and femur. A device on the wheelchair restricts bending to no more than a 60-degree angle; no sitting up straight. In two weeks, though, the brace comes off and Mrs. Long is hoping to rebound as she has from previous setbacks.

Four years ago a fall fractured her pelvis in two places, an accident that took her out of the classroom for more than a year.

"My painting, my art is good therapy for me," she says. "The year I fell I must have painted 50 watercolors

and given them away to people here at the school."

In summer 1992, she was diagnosed with Lyme disease, which affected the left side of her body. When she began experiencing pain in the same area more recently, Mrs. Long thought it might be lingering symptoms of that illness. X-rays and tests showed otherwise and battle began against a new assailant.

After 28 1/2 years in the classroom, some well-meaning friends are suggesting it might be time for her to give up teaching, but despite recent illnesses Mrs. Long isn't sure she's ready.

"People tell me, 'why not go ahead and retire,'" she said. "But these children are my life. As long as I'm able, I want to be with children."

WE'VE GOT THE SPIRIT

Students Learning To Give From Heart

BY SUSAN USHER

"Maybe Christmas doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more."

Those lines from the popular Dr. Seuss tale, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," express the lesson students at Crary School in Shallotte are learning this holiday season.

Inspired by the story of the Grinch, last year school founder Foy Crary instituted a "spirit hearts" program, in which students earn a heart in recognition of acts of kindness "above and beyond the ordinary" at home or at school. The hearts are mounted on the front window of the school in the shape of a larger heart that grows with each addition.

The program was such a success last year it was repeated this Christmas. Already, the front window of Crary School is nearly covered with a giant heart, with more

hearts waiting to be mounted.

Like the Grinch's heart, students' "hearts" are growing literally and figuratively as they come to understand the true meaning of Christmas through a schoolwide project called "We've Got the Spirit."

The idea came from Crary's desire to instill in students something more than academics. She hoped the students would move beyond their wants at Christmas and adopt an attitude of giving, said Toni Iossi, a school parent.

"The students tend to think they can't give anything if they don't have money," said Mary Ann Prugel, a kindergarten teacher. "We were trying to help them understand they give by sharing, by having a cheerful attitude when they help, that that's a better way to give to your family than presents."

"We were hoping to instill a change of attitude, a change of heart," she said. "We have so much to give to each other and we wanted to help our community in the same way."

The students' goodwill extends beyond their home and school into the community, as the entire Crary School has "adopted" a family with the intention of providing it the best Christmas possible.

Students have brought in non-per-

ishable foods and new clothing such as underwear, socks and sweaters for the five children and two adults, as well as some toys for the two youngest children.

The family also gets the school Christmas tree, a "giving tree" decorated by students who paid 25 cents per handmade ornament for the privilege. Money raised in this effort will go to buy perishable groceries for the family.

The school's Parent Teacher Organization has pitched in as well, helping with the family's winter electric bill.

"I've never done anything like this before. My favorite part is giving the gifts and the food," said Ginger Clayton. "They didn't have either. This way they can have one real Christmas."

Added Angel Schettini, "It's nice to get presents, but you don't always have to have them. I had always heard it is better to give than to receive and now I understand that."

Because they believe the project is worthwhile, in January the school will enter the Christmas project in Scholastic Magazine's Kids Care Contest for 1993-94.

Notes Iossi, "The best part is that the cheerful attitudes, unlike the paper hearts on the front window, last long after the project has ended."



SIXTH GRADER Elisha Thompson and kindergarten student Noah Jobe hang ornaments on a Christmas tree that will go to a family befriended by Crary School for the holidays. In the left background the school's "spirit heart" can be seen in the front window.

STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER