

Lonsdale woman opens her heart with crocheted hats and scarves

By [James Walsh](#) Star Tribune

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Elizabeth Sammons of Lonsdale delivered 265 crocheted scarves and 298 hats to the Union Gospel Mission in St. Paul.

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Even before getting a new heart in June 2015, Elizabeth Sammons decided to open it to those less fortunate.

The 34-year-old Lonsdale woman, who was born with a heart defect and suffered heart failure in 2009 at age 25, started what she calls [Crocheting With a Cause](#) as a way to not only take her mind off her pain and fatigue, but to make a difference for thousands of others. Now in their fourth year of an ongoing project that annually requires months of work and miles of yarn, Sammons and several friends delivered hundreds of handmade hats and scarves to the Union Gospel Mission in St. Paul just before Christmas.

“I have a talent that God gave me and I want to use it for his glory and not hide it,” said Sammons. “This is what I can do. I can sit here and I can crochet.”

Her efforts have become much more than that. Consider it paying it forward — and paying it back.

Dustin, her husband, is in a wheelchair. Combined with her “heart stuff,” Sammons said that more and more their lives depended on friends and family stepping in to help with cleaning or cooking.

“I always felt bad, or lazy, because I couldn’t help them,” she said. “I couldn’t do for myself and I wanted to thank them but I couldn’t.”

She’d learned to crochet at age 8 from her mother, Sammons said, but “I kind of threw it to the side because it’s an old lady thing.”

While she took it up again about 15 years ago, she’d pretty much reached the end of the yarn in terms of making things for family and friends. Then on Facebook Sammons found out about a woman in another state who tied scarves to trees for people who were homeless and others in need. A cause was born.

“It really allowed me to take the focus off of what was going on with me,” she said. “It gave me a purpose, something to do.”

Sammons, then the advertising coordinator of the Faribault Daily News, started by making a handful of scarves, which she left tied to trees in a local park. They were gone in days. She made 20 more. They, too, disappeared.

After a Twin Cities television station did a story about her project, Sammons got a call from a woman in St. Paul who suggested moving the effort north. They recruited more volunteers and in December 2018, working with St. Paul Parks and Recreation officials, Sammons and her team distributed more than 1,100 scarves in 13 parks, she said.

Each scarf had a note attached: “I’m not lost. But if you find yourself out in the cold, take me if you need me.”

In two weeks, not a scarf was left behind.

This year's contribution of 265 scarves and 298 hats to the Union Gospel Mission in St. Paul was the first for that organization, Sammons said. She got the idea of going to the mission after donating hats and scarves to its counterpart in Iowa in January 2018. Sammons said her "heart grandpa" works at the Iowa facility.

Heart grandpa?

The man's grandson was the donor of the heart now beating in Sammons. "He calls me his heart granddaughter," she said.

Sammons now works part-time as a cashier in a grocery store near the home in Lonsdale that she shares with Dustin and service dogs Stitchy, a 13-year-old rat terrier, and Gabby, a 3-year-old lab. She walks, rides her bike, goes camping and takes a nap every day. She's had a couple of scary moments when her body tried rejecting her transplanted heart but mostly, she said, she's doing fine.

And she has no plans to put the crochet hooks down anytime soon. Her next project will likely start in February, she said. She already has 13 totes full of yarn, much of it provided by people who have been inspired by her work but aren't able to make hats and scarves themselves.

This year for the first time, Sammons said she heard from someone who got one of her scarves. On the day she dropped off her bundles at the Union Gospel Mission, a woman came up to her and hugged her.

"She thanked me and said she'd never had something like this before," Sammons said. "It's fun to see it come to fruition ... if they want me back, I'll come back with more."

James Walsh is a reporter covering St. Paul and its neighborhoods. He has had myriad assignments in nearly 30 years at the Star Tribune, including federal courts and St. Paul schools.