Plastic Mat Project Weaves Softer Nights for Homeless

SALINAS, Calif. -- Thursday afternoons, a group of women gather at the Steinbeck Library to weave mats for homeless people to sleep on. They weave, not with cotton or wool, but with plastic bags cut into strips.

That would be the same plastic bags into which the supermarket clerk puts the egg cartons and ground beef. The women call their weaving material "plarn," with the "pl" for "plastic" and the "arn" for yarn, said Ramona Romandia, a librarian. Once they've knitted several of the clean, 6-foot long blankets, they bundle them out the door. They tote them across Lincoln Street to the First United Methodist Church.
"Once we're done, they serve as sleeping mats for the homeless," said Romandia, a librarian, who has a masters in library science.

The advantages the plarn mats provide to a homeless person are critical, she said. For example, the mats thicken the barrier separating the ground from a blanket or a sleeping bag with a person tucked inside it.

Brian Dusenberry, 34, has slept on two of the plarn mats, and they do make a difference in the outdoors, he said. "You put them on the ground and they help you stay drier," he said. "Your blankets don't get so dirty. They have a cushioning impact."

If you're homeless or for some other reason forced to sleep outdoors, "bedtime" can mean the wet cement or damp earth. Sleep swirls in, less as an opportunity for peaceful rest and optimistic dreams than the real dangers of the dark, including assault and robbery. The plarn mats can do little to shield a person from those threats, but they can help assure that the fragments of sleep remaining are more restful, Dusenberry said.

Romandia got the idea for making the plarn mats at the Steinbeck Library as a community project while visiting a library in Turlock, Calif., which had a similar effort. The Steinbeck Library already had a crocheting and knitting group, but the emphasis was on creating items such as shawls and gloves. Making plastic mats for the homeless was another matter. Romandia had to learn to crochet herself.

The mat-making technique requires cutting around a plastic bag to create a series of circle-shaped plastic rings. Next step is to loop the rings together, pulling them straight into a 3-foot-long strand of plarn then crocheting that strand — and many others, of course — into a mat. Most of the mats are 6-feet long, which accommodates the majority of heights.

"These mats are well-received and prized highly," said the Rev. Jim Luther, pastor of First United Methodist. "They keep people off the ground, and the ground is cold and damp. These mats are a meaningful gesture."

Romandia, a 62-year old mother of four, is motivated to work with the plastic mat project for several basic reasons. One thought is that the number of homeless are multiplying, she said. Romandia lives in San Jose and commutes to Salinas daily. That gives her ample time to reflect.

Another reason, another motivation, for helping those less fortunate is that, that threat of homelessness could impact anyone. "At some point any one of us could be out there in the street," she said.
Comprehension questions – answers may be in phrases.

1. List three positive attributes of this variety of sleeping mat.

2. List three terms used to describe the process used to create the mats.

3. Define plarn as used in the article.

4. Explain why a 6-foot mat would accommodate a majority of heights.

5. Define fragments as used in the text.

Answer each question in one or more complete sentences and by providing complete explanations.

1. Aside from the actual process of creating the mats, which portion of the creation process would likely be the most tedious (time-consuming)? Explain fully. (This question is worth twice as much as the others on this page.)

2. Why does the librarian believe that helping the homeless is a worthy cause?
3. Why is this topic especially relevant during the winter months? Use ACE to guide your response.

4. The last two AOTW have focused on recycling materials in creative and useful ways. Looks around your house/neighborhood/school. What things do we throw away that might have another use? Design a plan that you could implement to help others or to even save the planet.