



Elizabeth Brooks, 101, holds 2-month-old Katherine Fuller, one of premature infants for whom Brooks has sewn clothing. Photos by HAROLD CRAWFORD / Los Angeles Times

A Gift for Life

Grandmother, 101, Sews Tiny Clothes for Babies Born Too Soon

GLENDALE

By ANNE KLARNER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The 101-year-old woman held the tiny infant girl, a baby born too soon. One of the hands that had stitched the pink flannel gown the baby wore, a hand that was pale, spotted and veined with purple, lifted a corner of a blanket and wiped the baby's mouth.

"You're so tiny," the old woman crooned. "You're so cute."

Elizabeth (Grandma) Brooks celebrated her birthday Friday at Glendale Adventist Medical Center by delivering two dozen hand-sewn flannel gowns for the infants in the hospital's neonatal intensive-care unit.

Brooks, a former nurse, has been involved in community service all her life. In the past five years alone, she has dressed more than 200 Southern belle dolls, sewing by hand all the clothes down to the underwear. The dolls were then distributed by granddaughter Robin Stephens to sick children in Honolulu, where Stephens lives.

"I think it's instinctual that I'm a nurse. Your life is given over to helping people or you wouldn't choose that profession," Brooks said.

"I'm convinced that [the reason] she's lived this long is that she knows what her gifts are, and she's willing to put the time in being productive," said family friend Patty Doran, a chemical dependency counselor at the hospital, who was instrumental in bringing Brooks and her sewing skills to Glendale Adventist.

Doran has been friends with Brooks and her daughter

Virginia Stephens, 72, since she and Robin Stephens, 45, were girls living in Brentwood. Last December, she asked Robin Stephens if some of Brooks' dolls could be donated to Glendale Adventist and White Memorial Hospital in Boyle Heights, and Stephens agreed.

Glendale Adventist nurse Robin Mulvehill saw the dolls and remarked that the clothes were just the right size for the babies in the neonatal intensive-care unit where she works.

"The parents really like having the babies dressed," she said. "It takes away from all the tubes."

Although doll clothes are the right size for premature infants, who weigh as little as three pounds at birth, they often have lace and other irritating parts.

"We've had clothing in the past that we've purchased," Mulvehill said. "But these clothes were stitched with love for a purpose, not cranked out in a factory."

Brooks, who attributes her longevity to her optimistic nature, started making dolls and baby clothes because a series of fractures to her hip, ankle and legs had laid her up. But she could still use her hands and wanted to keep busy.

"I use my fingers and I've strengthened my fingers. When you use your needle and handle materials and stuff, you use your fingers more than anything," she said. Her solid handshake bears witness.

She started working on the infant gowns about four or five weeks ago. The hospital is paying for the fabric and sponsored the birthday party.

She sews "oh, about four hours a day, about two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. I get up in the

Please see GRANDMA, J8



HAROLD CRAWFORD / Los Angeles Times

Brooks, who uses a wheelchair to get around, began sewing doll clothes to cheer hospitalized children.

GRANDMA

Continued from J1

morning about eight o'clock and sew till 12, then I rest, and then I sew for a couple hours. In the evening, there's television."

Her grandmother taught her to sew when she was a girl in Oakland. Later, when she was in her late 30s, she went to dressmaking school and began sewing her own clothes.

She sticks to hand-sewing nowadays because "I can't get around

to a machine. I can use my hands easier." She gets around at home in Culver City with a walker, but uses a wheelchair when she's out. Her needlework is meticulous.

"I'm only 30 and I can't make that," neonatal nurse Michelle Schneider said as she admired one of the 18-inch-long gowns.

"I enjoyed the babies," Brooks said after holding Katherine Fuller, who is 8 weeks old and weighs only 5 pounds, 12 ounces, which is up from the 3 pounds, 7½ ounces she weighed when she was born 2½ months early. "I'm so glad the

little things worked."

Her next project will be making even smaller clothes for the babies who don't live. The hospital wants to dress them so they can be presented to the parents to help them grieve and come to terms with the death.

Virginia Stephens, who takes care of her mother and helps get fabric and supplies for her, doesn't mind the extra work.

"I'm delighted to do it and it works out well, as long as it keeps my mother happy and well. It's therapy for me too," she said.