

The San Diego Union-Tribune

POWAY NEWS CHIEFTAIN
&
RANCHO BERNARDO NEWS JOURNAL

Poway sewing group members make dresses for impoverished girls overseas

Sew Love members mostly live in Poway and Rancho Bernardo

By [ELIZABETH MARIE HIMCHAK](#) | ehimchak@pomeradonews.com

PUBLISHED: August 4, 2026 at 2:15 PM PDT

Bert Rhine)



Sew Love volunteers Juli Edwards, Kathie Browning, Cynthia Rhine, Teri Rebelez, Cathie Chludzinski and Kathy Lahr holding dresses they made for girls in Third World countries

Once a month, a group of women gather at the Poway home of Cynthia Rhine to cut dress pattern pieces out of colorful cotton fabric to help little girls they will never meet.

They then take the fabric pieces with them so they can sew dresses over the next month from the comfort of their homes.

This variation on the sewing bee has led to the creation of over 300 dresses in the past year that quite possibly are the only new clothing girls in countries such as Uganda and Kenya will ever own.

The dresses not only clothe the girls, but help protect them.

“When we give a girl a nice dress, it keeps away predators; they will not steal (the girls) as often,” Rhine said she has heard from missionaries who deliver the dresses to impoverished countries.

In these Third World societies, girls are considered to be “non-persons,” she said. But if the girl has a pretty new dress, she appears to be more valued by her family and consequently gains protection.

Rhine said the group of around 15 women, mostly from Poway and Rancho Bernardo, in the Sew Love group do not make clothes for boys because “they are treated like royalty” by their families since they are deemed important. Boys are given nicer clothes than their sisters ever receive.

Sew Love was started by Rancho Bernardo resident Diane Hamilton in September 2023. While she has stepped away from making the dresses, she still collects them from the volunteers and delivers them to North Coast Church in Vista.

The church sponsors around eight mission trips a year to places like Haiti, Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica, the Philippines and various countries in Africa, such as Uganda and Kenya. Its mission trip volunteers go to villages and directly give the girls the dresses made by Sew Love and similar groups, according to Rhine.

“What inspired me, was a few years ago I saw a random post (on social media) about an old woman who was more than 100 and was sewing dresses for little girls in Third World countries,” Hamilton said. “I thought, I want to be productive like that.”

Hamilton said she looked into various things she could do, and starting old-fashioned sewing bee appealed to her, even though her sewing skills were limited.

“I thought women could share doing this together in a unique community-type of thing,” she said.

While some such groups take it upon themselves to ship the dresses they make overseas, Hamilton said she did not want the Sew Love members to incur that expense. Through a friend, she found out about North Coast Church’s mission trips.

“They had some specific guidelines, like there had to be pockets,” Hamilton said, who found some patterns that met the requirements.



Sew Love volunteers Kathy Lahr, Kathie Browning and Cynthia Rhine using a pattern to cut fabric.

The dresses also have to be made only from cotton since it is the fabric that best withstands the way the clothing is handwashed in rivers, usually beaten by a rock in the washing process. The dresses also must have straps or ties at the shoulders and no elastic, buttons, zippers or Velcro since the girls will not be able to repair these since they lack the sewing skills. If buttons are included, they can only be decorative in purpose, Rhine said.

The fabric must also be very bright and colorful, since that is what people in these areas prefer, she added.

Hamilton recruited some members and they initially met at her church in Rancho Peñasquitos to cut fabric and sew. But lugging heavy sewing machines each month was an issue and the church room was not always available.

After about a year, Rhine offered her Poway home as a meeting place, but to only lay out patterns and cut fabric, not sew. This turned out to be more feasible, Hamilton said, because the group could also store its donated fabric and sewing notions at Rhine's house.

"They are just cranking out these dresses that are so cute," Hamilton said.

"The whole purpose of the group I started was to help these little girls," Hamilton said. "This will be the only brand new dress most ever receive, so we want to do our best work.

"We want to bless them ... and shine God's love onto these children," Hamilton said.

Rhine said most of the 15 Sew Love members heard about the group via social media — she made some posts on NextDoor — or through word of mouth. They meet from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on the first Friday of each month.

"One thing that is common to the women, is that 90% have been teachers or social workers," Rhine said. "They are the give back type of people."

They are also all retired or semi-retired. She attributed this to them having the time to spend sewing and also being of the age that they learned how to sew from their mothers or by taking home economics in junior high or high school.

This is true for Rancho Bernardo resident Christine Evans, a retired Poway Unified teacher who joined in March after hearing about Sew Love from someone.

"I made all my clothes when I was young, the cause is so good and I was pulled to it right away," Evans said. "It is now my favorite group."

Evans said she also makes quilts for Gently Hugged to help local babies in need.

"My dress sewing skills were very rusty (when I joined), but I'm learning more ... and love the creativity of it," she said. "The dresses are very simple and the people give such wonderful advice, like how to trim the pockets to make them more attractive."

Evans said she has completed 10 dresses, has two in progress and material cut for four more.

"The dresses are very simple, like that for a baby doll," Evans said. "I can make a dress in a day."

Evans said she has opted to buy discounted fabric online and donate it to the cause because there are few options to buy reasonably-priced fabric at stores in the area.

While the patterns they use are simple, Rhine said the members all work hard to make the dresses as pretty as possible by using contrasting colors for the pockets or by adding ruffles.



Sew Love volunteers Cynthia Rhine and Juli Edwards cutting pattern pieces from fabric. (Bert Rhine)

"The ladies do such beautiful work ... and Cynthia is a great finisher and encourager. She's just such a lovely person," Evans said.

To get more variety in their patterns and more sizes, Rhine turned to her sister, Karolyn Kiisel, who is a fashion designer in Los Angeles. Kiisel took the patterns they had to some associates who volunteered their services to make additional pattern sizes since for some dress styles they had only two sizes. Now, most of the dresses can be made in sizes 4 through 10, which usually fit girls up to ages 10 or 12, according to Rhine.

"We used to do sizes 12 and 14, but were told by the missionaries they need smaller sizes because the girls are small," Rhine said. "The dresses have to be really easy to adjust by tying at the shoulders."

Rhine said the group usually completes 30 to 35 dresses in a month.

Some of the women also cut fabric for menstrual supply kits that are essentially an absorbent pantyliner with wings and a flannel insert. That project is organized by Teri Rebelez.

"The older girls have to skip school each month because they don't have feminine hygiene supplies like we have here," Rhine said when talking about why the kits are needed.

Rhine said she felt called to join Sew Love because she was at a point in her life where she wanted to keep sewing, but did not have anyone to make items for anymore.

"We're all having a great time," Rhine said.

"This is such a lovely group of ladies who are very welcoming," Evans said. "I love being part of this. It's been a wonderful thing for me personally."

Sew Love is accepting new volunteers, who can come to the monthly gatherings whenever available. The group is also accepting donations of colorful cotton fabric and sewing supplies. For details, email Rhine at Cynthia@brmarketing.com.

#