

**By: Joe Fiorito Columnist, Published on Mon Apr 29 2013**

Repairing our frayed social safety net with art: Fiorito, Toronto Star

**Ontario's fraying social safety net gets some bright new stitches.**



*Emma Frees, left, and Daniela Mergarten display some of the canvas squares that will be used as part of a quilt illustrating people's concerns about the shabby state of Ontario's social safety net.*

A panel from the social safety net quilt aims to raise awareness about mental health issues.

"Acknowledge us, we matter" proclaims another panel that will form part of the social safety net quilt.

A panel from the social safety net quilt touches on the need for affordable housing.

Recently, after a long day at work, Naomi Berlyne and a friend were talking over the phone about how miserable and precarious life is when you are homeless, and when your income consists solely of welfare or disability benefits. Naomi works at HouseLink; she helps some people find supportive housing.

"We were saying that we'd have to knit our own social safety net. We were joking, but a light went on."

It occurred to them that it would be cheeky fun if people could illustrate some squares of cloth, and stitch them together into a quilt or banner, to describe their concerns about the social safety net; the result could be used to capture the attention of the powers that be.

Naomi said, “We formed a committee and got the word out.” Word spread far, wide and fast. I dropped by the other day to see how things are coming along.

I saw several tables filled with canvas squares, some painted, a few appliquéd, and others gussied up with glue and sparkles. I also met Emma Frees and Daniela Mergarten.

Emma pointed to a colourful heap of canvas and said, “These are the things people are feeling insecure about.” She selected a square with a picture of a house. “You can’t do a thing when you’re homeless.”

Emma knows whereof she speaks; she and her family were without a place to stay for a while, when her landlord sold the house out from under her; she spent a long time moving from here to there; it was not easy. “I just couldn’t find a place. I had to learn to lie, and hide my kids.” Why? Because the places she could afford were places that didn’t want anyone with children.

Daniela also knows about homelessness. “I left home at 16. It was about safety. I had an abusive stepfather. I lived in poverty. We moved at night. I went from school to school. I remember once running outside in my bare feet because he was beating me.” She eventually found a place of her own. She lived in her last place for 35 years; grew some plants, built a deck, made improvements, made a life.

And?

“The landlord sold the house. The real estate agent who bought it said I shouldn’t worry, he’d give me a lease.” But he did not give her a lease and now she is, let’s just say, under-housed.

“I’m lucky I don’t go around the bend. I have no windows in my place. I lost my plants. My place is a firetrap.”

Neither of these women has been idle. Emma said, “I’ve been seeking work for 11 years. I started looking in my ‘40’s. The whole world’s got my data now. I’ve had about three interviews from about 200 applications.”

The women showed me some of the squares that have come in. Emma said, “This one’s got food — fruit, fish, vegetables.” Daniela: “Stuff we can’t afford.” Emma: “If you have a job, you can get the housing and the food.”

So it goes; the concerns include public transit, mental health supports, dignity and respect.

Daniela showed me the square she made: “Three houses; they look very happy, lived in. There are window dressings, and somebody is cooking in the kitchen. The sun is shining. It’s a community. I put roots underneath the house.” Why?

“I never had safety, growing up.”

There will be a lot said about the social safety net in the coming days; nothing you hear will be so eloquent as this.

You can, if you like, contribute a square of your own; paints work, as do magic markers; you can also sew, stitch or crochet your message on lightweight canvas.

Naomi — her email address is [naomibe@houcelink.on.ca](mailto:naomibe@houcelink.on.ca) — said, “We also want people from outside Toronto. We can do workshops if anybody would like one.”

For more information, here is the website for the project: <http://stitchingoursocialsafetynet.webs.com>