

# Sharing the love of Christ one stitch at a time

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Earlier this year, Alicia Valdez Mendoza was looking for a ministry that she could call her own at Cristo Rey Parish in Austin. She and her sisters had worked in their parents' 25-year resale shop, but she wanted to do more.

"I wanted to be productive," Mendoza said.

Reading the diocesan E-Pistle one day, she saw a blurb about a prayer shawl ministry. The E-Pistle is Friday communication from the Austin Diocese that is published on the diocesan web site at [www.austindiocese.org](http://www.austindiocese.org).

Yvonne Saldaña, administrative assistant for the diocesan Office of Pro-Life Activities and Chaste Living, placed the blurb in the E-Pistle after witnessing the power of prayer shawls.

"I had a death that touched my heart," Saldaña said. That person had received a prayer shawl. At that time, the only such ministries she knew of were at St. Margaret Mary Parish in Cedar

Park and St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Austin.

Many of the shawls that are knitted and crocheted are given to the Seton Healthcare Family for their No One Dies Alone program, which provides comfort to dying patients at the hospital who have no family at their bedside.

When Mendoza called Saldaña looking to join a prayer shawl ministry, Saldaña challenged her to start her own.

In March, after receiving permission from her pastor — Conventual Franciscan Father Mario Castro Martínez — Mendoza and about a dozen women launched the ministry at Cristo Rey.

They meet every Thursday evening, beginning with prayer over the yarn and materials that will be used to create the shawls, over the hands that will knit and crochet, and for those who will receive them.

"We do this so God will bless our work," she said. "It's testimony to the gifts God has blessed each of us with that goes into the shawls. We pray each



**THE FIRST BATCH OF PRAYER SHAWLS** made by the Prayer Shawl Ministry at Cristo Rey Parish in Austin was presented to Hospice Austin's Christopher House in June. The shawls are made for people who are sick or near death. (Photo by Enedelia J. Obregón)

recipient feels the power of love, strength and faith."

The first batch of shawls was donated in June to Hospice Austin's Christopher House, which offers compassionate end-of-life care.

Father Martínez blessed the

shawls before they were given to Christopher House. The Rev. Melissa Russell, a chaplain at Christopher House, was thankful for the work of the ministry.

"It means so much to know you are calling for every stitch to be a comfort to those I serve," Russell told the group.

She said the shawls and blankets made by volunteers provide color in the rooms of the patients and warmth and comfort to each person who receives one. Russell said the gift of the shawls continue long after the person dies.

"It's an invaluable gift," she said. Often the shawls go on to comfort those left behind after the death of a loved one.

"There was a person who left a child behind," Russell said. "I told her she could take the shawl. I put it around her shoulders. It made her feel that she's not alone."

Mendoza's aunt, Emma Montemayor inspired her attraction to the ministry. Montemayor, who died two years ago, loved to crochet.

"She would make afghans and give them away," Mendoza said. "She never sold them."

Although Mendoza was not handy with crocheting or knitting needles, she learned to crochet so she could undertake the ministry. Each stitch also brought her closer to her parish and the faith which she had strayed from for a while.

"It gave me the opportunity to come back and make a difference," Mendoza said. "I thank God he chose me for this."

Mendoza said "every stitch links" everyone together, reminding them of their connection to God.

"Each stitch is made with love, faith and hope," she said. "We pray for each shawl recipi-

ent that they realize they are not alone."

The ministry also gave others an opportunity to contribute to the community.

"No one knew how to knit or crochet when Alice started this ministry," said Dorothy Portillo. "It's something I hope we can carry the rest of our lives. I plan to continue doing this."

One of the volunteers is 12-year-old Paulina Guerrero, who will be in seventh grade this fall.

"I always wanted to know how to knit," she said. "I also wanted to be able to serve."

Now that she's learned, she plans to continue making prayer shawls.

"I like making shawls and doing stuff with my hands," she said. "It's a beautiful thing to make."

Frances Martínez sees much love going into making the shawls.

"I can pray while we are making them and hope the person gets well," she said.

Lily Reyes said the ministry is teaching her patience.

"I'm learning to be patient because I'm doing something special for somebody else," she said.

The ministry has created a close-knit group whose mission has also benefitted them, reducing the stress of work and traffic.

"We talk about whatever," said Mendoza, who works for Travis County. "It's also a great support group. It keeps us going."

*Individuals who are interested in making prayer shawls* for the sick or in starting a prayer shawl ministry at their parish may call Yvonne Saldaña at the (512) 949-2486 or [yvonne-saldana@austindiocese.org](mailto:yvonne-saldana@austindiocese.org).

## Christi Center expands facilities



**BISHOP JOE VÁSQUEZ** recently visited the Austin nonprofit, The Christi Center, which has been providing free peer-based grief support services to Central Texans for more than 25 years. He toured the facility, which recently expanded to include additional meeting rooms, including a heart wall and children's room, as well as a healing garden and nature garden.

Susan and Don Cox (above at right of Bishop Vásquez), founders of The Christi Center, formerly called For the Love of Christi, in honor of their daughter Christi who was killed by a drunk driver in 1987, are long-time parishioners of St. John Neumann Parish in Austin. Former Christi Center Board President and 2012 volunteer of the year Jimmy Shields is a member of St. Helen Parish in Georgetown, and current board Vice President Suzanne Torres is a member of St. Theresa Parish in Austin.

The Christi Center provides love, hope, comfort and ongoing support to children, teens and adults adjusting to life after the death of a loved one, regardless of circumstances. It provides grief support services to anyone — free of charge — for as long as they need them and has helped more than 72,000 Central Texans in various stages of grief.

In addition to its peer-support services, The Christi Center educates the community about grief and concerns of the bereaved. The majority of its funding is through individual donations. The Christi Center is located at 2306 Hancock Dr. in Austin and has a satellite office at the Georgetown Community Resource Center, where it offers groups in Williamson County. For more information, visit [www.fortheloveofchristi.org](http://www.fortheloveofchristi.org).