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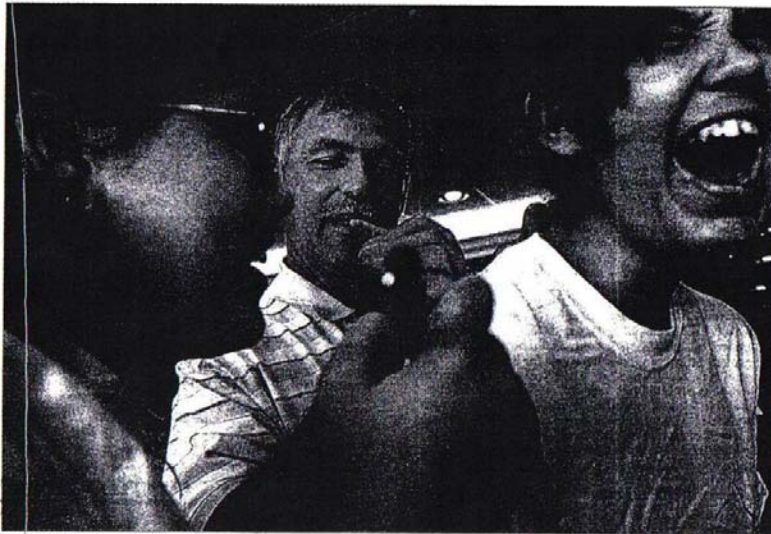
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Making their mark



STAFF PHOTO / CHIP LITHELAND / chip.litheland@heraldtribune.com
Ryan Pierce, 15, right, laughs as her Boys and Girls Club pal Beverly Rumberger, 13, left, and Verizon employee Ed Peters of Irving, Texas, sign her shirt while the group were decorating pillows and quilts Wednesday at the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort on Longboat Key. The decorated items will be given to children at Sarasota Memorial Hospital today. **Page 3B.**

Blanketing sick kids with comfort

By JANEL STEPHENS

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SARASOTA — His face etched in concentration, Tom Paolucci squatted low as he colored a rainbow he had drawn on a patch of quilt.

Attached to the rainbow was a yellow star, with the words "You're" and "Star" in big bubble letters.

He left the "A" for last.

"I'm just waiting for the right color," said the father of a 12-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son.

Paolucci, an inventory manager from Albany, N.Y., was one of 100 Verizon executives who joined children from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Sarasota County on Wednesday to create inspirational quilts and pillows for sick children.

The phone company donated 100 red-and-white quilts that will be delivered today to 35 chronically ill children at Sarasota Memorial Hospital.

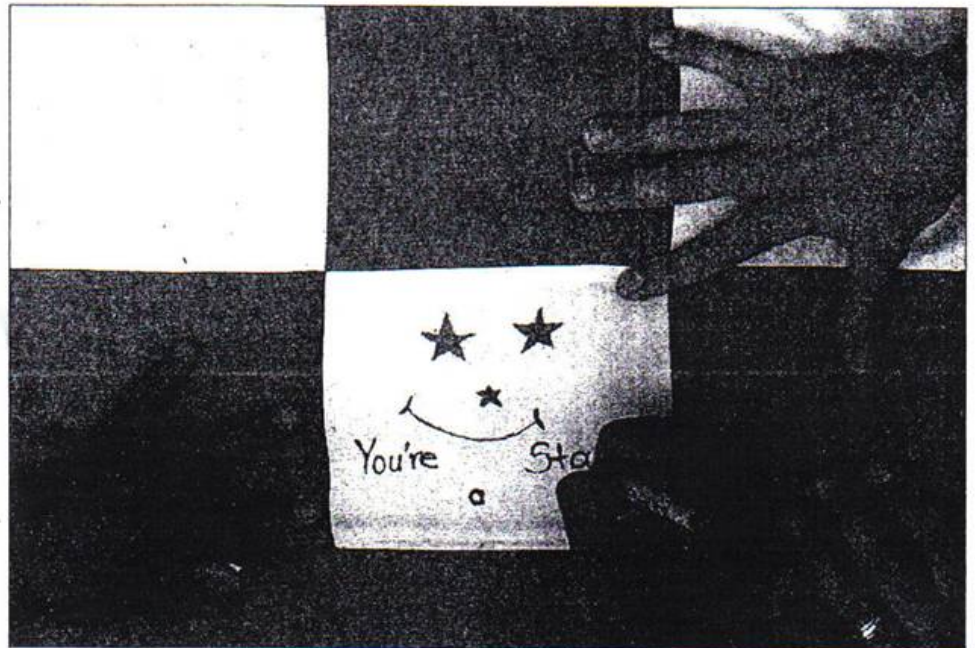
Each quilt contains individual messages from children and adults, reassuring sentiments such as: "You're a special flower blowing in the breeze," from Beverly Rumberger, 13, of Brookside Middle School; "Here is a big smile for you" with a smiley face from Chris Dickey, 13; and "Hug this spot!!!, Love Ed," from Ed Peters, a Verizon engineer from Irving, Texas.

"It's very heartwarming," said Sarasota Memorial Hospital spokesman Mike Vizvary. "For them to take the time and energy, it's very encouraging."

The idea stems from Soaringwords, a nonprofit organization in New York whose mission is to provide services for families with chronically ill children.

The organization has four primary areas of service: an Internet-based resource center, www.soaringwords.org, for families and educators; a hospital outreach program; an educational outreach program; and a youth leadership initiative.

Lisa Honig Buksbaum is the founder and chief executive officer of Soaringwords. Buks-



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Anthony McKoy, 15, of the Boys and Girls Club, draws on a quilt Wednesday with the help of Jeff Castellanos, a Verizon executive from Irving, Texas, at the Colony Beach & Tennis Resort.



Veronica Hernandez, 16, left, of the Boys and Girls Club colors a pillow as Verizon employee Jena Downs of Baltimore, Md., watches.

baum, a mother of two boys, ages 14 and 8, developed the idea after going through a succession of family crises within a year and a half.

Her brother Gary died in an asthma-induced heart attack at age 38. Five weeks later her father fought his second bout

with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, and 10 months later her son, Jonathan, was stricken with rheumatic fever, suffering heart and neurological damage. Both recovered.

"There are no words to describe how it feels," Buksbaum told the Verizon executives

during a luncheon at the Colony Beach & Tennis Resort on Longboat Key. "It's a moment indelibly burned into your heart. When your child is ill, your entire world stops."

Dawn Page, director of program services for the Boys and Girls Clubs, said that Wednesday was an excellent opportunity for the children to interact with adults to learn the value of something that's often overlooked.

"The youth, just like adults, have a tendency to take health for granted," Page said. "This experience has helped them creatively send their love to sick children."

Booker Middle School seventh-grader Curtis Reynolds and his friend, Alex LaRoche, 12, drew pictures of sailboats, flowers and a tic-tac-toe box on their quilt.

"It was fun making stuff for other kids that aren't feeling well," Reynolds, 13, said. "It makes me feel good."