The 40 Pieces of Peace Justice Marchiano Quilt

Hanging on a public wall in the Contra Costa County Law Library is a unique, patriotic quilt representing access to justice and peace. Retired Justice James Marchiano, who served on the Contra Costa Bench from 1988 to 1998 before his appointment to the Court of Appeal, donated the quilt that has a rich history.

In 1993 The Parents Club at Christ the King School in Pleasant Hill planned a significant fund raiser for each of the nine grades. The students in each class decided on a theme for the squares of large quilts to be made by the students with the help of creative parents. The finished quilts were to be auctioned off at a public fund raiser. Collections of butterflies, brilliant flowers, nature scenes were logical themes selected by some of the young quilters.

The troublesome First Gulf War was engaging American troops overseas in the Iraq-Kuwaiti desert. The fourth graders, known to be a mature, thoughtful class, decided to make a patriotic quilt to honor the soldiers and promote the concept of peace. Each fourth grader designed a red, white, and blue square with individualized American flags and peace symbols in separate white squares. The border of each square was a bright red with the outside border of the quilt a dark blue. Class mothers helped to bring all the pieces together in a large quilt that proclaimed a dramatic, patriotic red, white, and blue. The fourth-grade class entitled the finished quilt "Forty Pieces of Peace" to signify the forty squares on the quilt. The students signed his or her signature on the back of the quilt, and each square on the front contained the initials of the student who designed the particular square.

All of the quilts were extraordinary, but the fourth-grade quilt was exceptional. The Contra Costa Times featured it in an article. At the silent auction for the quilt, the bidding started at one hundred dollars and went up quickly in large increments. The bidding escalated with Judge Marchiano vying against a number of eager mothers for the quilt. When the bidding reached nine hundred dollars, Judge Marchiano told his rivals that he would hang the quilt in a public place rather than having it left out of sight in someone's home, if they allowed him to win the quilt with the next bid. The prize was his with one last large bid.

Judge Marchiano was assigned to Department Five on the third floor of the new Bray Courts Building in Martinez. He had located historical photographs of the earliest county court houses that were hung on the wall by the jury box. Other historical pictures were hung in the entrance to Department Five. Across from the jurors was a large white, empty fabric wall, a perfect place to display the quilt. He requested the first female county carpenter, who had hung the other items, to hang the quilt that required a special support so as not to harm the fabric on the wall and yet be secure enough to support the large quilt. She had a special ability for careful, difficult tasks and an artist's eye for placement.

The brilliant red, white and blue quilt was an instant hit with jurors, the public, lawyers, and court room staff. But one crucial mistake was made that revealed itself in time. Bright fluorescent lights lit up the room and shown on the quilt. Over time the light dulled the dark blue border of the quilt and softened some of the other bright colors. The quilt should have been protected in a light repellent container. But the basic colors and structure remained.
Numerous court visitors praised the quilt. One special group on a school field trip to court was thrilled to see the quilt and the signatures on the back. The same fourth graders quilters, now in the eighth grade, watched part of a trial in Department Five, seated near their quilt.

After Judge Marchiano went to the First district Court of Appeal, other judges occupied Department Five where the quilt remained, admired by jurors who served there. However, one day a sensitive prosecutor assigned to Department Five for a murder case made a motion to the judge to have the quilt that hung across from the jurors removed. He thought the patriotic, peace quilt might unduly influence jurors. The reluctant judge gave in and ordered the quilt removed, despite many high-profile criminal cases, including four death penalty trials, having been tried in Judge Marchiano's time, all with fair results. Ironically the quilt was then hung for many years in the Jury Assembly Room with a written explanation of its origin for prospective jurors to read. In 2015, almost twenty-five years later, the Jury Assembly Room was scheduled for refurbishment. The now older quilt did not fit into the plans for the new room and was to be discarded. Fortunately, some court staff were concerned and suggested the quilt be rescued and hung elsewhere. The Law Library in the Bray Building was a logical location since it was frequented by the public and lawyers, with wall space to display the now historic quilt. Director Carey Rowan and the Law Library Board welcomed the quilt where it hung prominently on a wall, symbolizing access to justice. The Law Library is used for many pro bono educational programs for those in need of legal advice. The unique quilt has found a new appropriate home in the new Law Library facility.