

A touching tribute

Silver thumbprint charms keep memories of woman alive for close circle of friends

By **Holly Zachariah**
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DeGRAFF, Ohio -- She had helping hands, the kind that lent themselves to any task asked of them, no matter how difficult.

They were strong hands, hands that Judy Kenton's three closest friends always admired. For more than 11 years, her hands held them tight. Though cancer took Kenton away from her faithful friends on Sept. 16, this Christmas season they keep her near.

In every swirl, curve, ridge and line on the delicate silver charm each now wears on her wrist, the women feel her.

There, cast in sterling silver, is Kenton's thumbprint.

"It reminds me of someone who loved life, someone I know I never want to forget," Connie Madden said as she fingered the grooves.

The charms came from an Illinois company that began selling them as mail-order keepsakes a decade ago. But the items, called Thumbies, quickly became a favorite of the funeral industry.

Today, 142 Ohio funeral homes offer to take prints of the deceased's fingertips and send them to Meadow Hill Co. Designers there look for an eye-catching curlicue or intricate lifeline and cast it onto charms, earrings, key chains, tie tacks, pins and cuff links.

"It's not for everyone. My own father once said it was grotesque," company founder David Gordon said.

And it can be pricey, anywhere from \$130 to more than \$500, depending on the item.

"But it's something tactile to touch," Gordon said, "and that's important to some people."

For each of Kenton's friends, the shimmery charm means something different.

"It makes me feel as if she's with me, touching me," said Pat Elliott, tears streaming down her face.

"It's simply Judy," said Patty Smith.

Madden, whose family owns the Rexer-Riggin-Madden Funeral Home in Logan County, took a print of her friend's thumb -- with the permission of Kenton's family -- the day before Kenton died. Madden ordered the charms for herself and the others as Christmas gifts.

She surprised Smith and Elliott with them this month.

"I couldn't believe it," Elliott said. "Here was this tiny print that was a part of Judy. Amazing."

These four women -- all from western and west-central Ohio -- forged a bond in 1994 during a weekend retreat at a Shelby County church. Afterward, the four formed a

spiritual support group, meeting at least three times a month in the 11 years since.

Over time, they've shared everything from the trivial (failed diets and bad-hair days), to the monumental (dates for Kenton, the only single one among them).

It was no different this June when Kenton, 60, fell ill. In August, a surgeon broke the news: "Aggressive cervical cancer has set in. Get your affairs in order."

They battled it together. As they did so, each of the four women wore a beaded witness bracelet -- with each colored bead holding some religious significance -- as a testament to her faith.

As Kenton neared the end of her fight, Madden chose what she thought was the most fitting way to honor her friend.

Now, dangling next to her bracelet's tiny silver cross and multicolored beads is the thumbprint.

On casual inspection, the thumb charm appears to be just another pretty, but likely meaningless, trinket.

Perhaps that's how Kenton would have wanted it.

"Judy didn't like to talk about herself," Smith said, "and never took a front-row seat in what she did."

Yet she was the kind of person who enjoyed life's little blessings, and freely let loose a soft chuckle whenever she was pleased.

These little charms, Elliott said, would have pleased her very much.

After sharing memories of their friend Tuesday night, and gathering together for the last time before Christmas, the three women said goodbye. As they held hands and gave holiday hugs, their little charms jingled and glistened on their wrists.

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