

## **Brattleboro Reformer (VT)**

February 28, 2009

### **Hand-made Hope**

Saturday, February 28 BRATTLEBORO -- We've all heard the statistics. Every two minutes a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer and more than 40,000 women lose their lives each year to the disease. For those who fight and win the breast cancer battle, many are scarred -- both physically and emotionally -- from surgeries and the treatment process.

To help these brave women regain a sense of beauty, self-confidence and meaning in their lives, Jamaica resident Katherine Paige has been creating knitted prosthetic breasts that are soft and pretty, inexpensive and easy to make.

Paige first heard about knitted prosthetic breasts while doing a "yarn crawl" with her good friend in Maine last summer. During their visit, the two started talking about a knitting shop in Brunswick, Maine, that was collecting knitted prosthetics for breast cancer survivors.

Paige had never heard of such a thing and was really taken by the idea. She knew a couple of women who would absolutely love to have one. So, Paige got the pattern and started planning.

"People heard about them and flocked to get them," Paige said. "They couldn't make them fast enough."

Paige's friend was using a silicone prosthetic at the time and was not happy with it. She said it was rubbery and didn't feel good against the skin. It also looked lopsided and became displaced at bad times, like when she was swimming.

Paige went to speak with Margaret Silvia, owner of the knitting shop Margie's Muse in Jamaica, and picked out the softest material she could find -- a cotton/soy blend that feels "wonderfully soft," as she puts it. This is important because the prosthetic is exposed to the skin and some materials can be irritating.

"You pick out yarn that's really soft and pretty," Paige said. "If it feels wonderfully soft, I get it."

Besides the cotton/soy blend, Paige uses a bamboo yarn that's surprisingly soft.

Paige has been knitting for eight years -- and openly says she's not the best knitter -- and says the process of making a knitted prosthetic is amazingly easy. It's basically two "sides" that are knitted in a circular pattern and then stuffed with a soft material like what goes into a teddy bear.

They can be made to different sizes and are concave on the inside to minimize exposure to the skin. She says it takes very little yarn and only a couple hours to make one.

She also puts a special weight inside because it would be too light otherwise. Some of them are small glass hearts with a message of "hope" or "love" written on them. For her first knitted breast that was going to be a gift for her friend, she did something a little more special.

"I went to her favorite beach and found a nice stone and put it in there," Paige said.

"When you knit something like this for someone it's really meaningful."

When the first one was finished, Paige was very happy with the results. Even though she thought it was a beautiful, meaningful gift, she was a bit reluctant to deliver it to her friend.

"I was a little apprehensive to give it to her. I didn't know what her reaction would be," Paige said. "I gave it to her and she absolutely loved it. She uses it exclusively now." Paige was so happy with the results, she made another one for an elderly woman she knew who had been stuffing her bra with tissues for years.

After her second knitted breast turned out better than expected, she decided to make one to put on display at Margie's Muse. Silvia placed it on the front counter in her shop to see if there would be any interest. Silvia said most people didn't even look at it, let alone ask questions.

But when a lady came in and did look at it, she immediately knew what it was and wanted it for a friend who was a breast cancer survivor. Paige has made several more in the past months and each one is quickly picked up.

"The few I've made get quickly picked up," Paige said. "As soon as I knit one, it's gone. It just makes people feel good."

One local resident was fortunate enough to be the recipient of one of Paige's creations on Friday. Voula Zervakis beamed with joy when she opened the small white box and pulled out a purple knitted prosthetic breast. After inspection, she said it was gorgeous and perfect for her.

"The idea is excellent," she said. "I never thought I'd have an option like this."

Zervakis has been using a silicone prosthetic for years and says it does a good job -- appearance wise -- but it's heavier than a real breast and can get really hot in the summer. Add that to the \$350 price tag -- which not all insurance companies cover -- and it's easy to see why some women who've undergone a mastectomy simply go without anything. Zervakis was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1999 and underwent radiation therapy and two surgeries before she was officially free of the disease. She said it was hard to look at herself in the mirror and see the imbalance at first, but she's received tremendous support from her family and the community, and has been free from the disease for nine years now.

Paige says almost everybody knows a woman who has been through breast cancer. And the way her knitted prosthetics have been going out the door, she sees an obvious demand for them.

"We all know someone who's been through this," Paige said. "More and more people are asking me to make them."

She will never, however, charge anybody for one of them. She says these women have been through enough and each and every one of the knitted prosthetic breasts she's given away as a gift. Even the ones given away to complete strangers were given for free, with love.

"It's the same idea as the newborn hats people knit," Paige said "I could never ask someone for money for something like this. These things are really a gift."

Up to this point, Paige has been buying all the yarn with her own money. She says she doesn't mind, but if the program expands to doctors' offices and chemo centers -- like she hopes -- it could become a real financial burden.

"Katherine has been so self-less about it," Silvia said. "We've got to raise some money for this yarn."

She says it doesn't take much yarn, but the good-quality, soft material does cost more than run-of-the-mill yarn.

Paige wants to continue making them for women who have gone through breast cancer

treatment. To do this, she's asking for donations of yarn, money or time.

"I would love for everybody who wants one to have one," Paige said. "It's a wonderful gift."

For anybody interested in learning to make knitted prosthetic breasts to give as a gift, there's an open knitting circle for knitters of all skill levels at Margie's Must in Jamaica each Thursday night from 5-7 p.m.

Patterns for making knitted prosthetic breasts can be found at Margie's Muse in Jamaica or at [knitty.com/ISSUEfall05/PATTbits.html](http://knitty.com/ISSUEfall05/PATTbits.html).

For more information, give the shop a call at 802-874-7201, visit [www.margiesmuse.com](http://www.margiesmuse.com) or stop by 3796 Route 30 in Jamaica.

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