

A cozier alternative to breast implants

Bag and Boob Babes makes
comfort items for breast
cancer patients, survivors



DEVIN WEEKS/Press

Bag and Boob Babes Northwest Director Sheila Wayman cuts fabric for a drain bag Monday in the sewing room of her Dalton Gardens home.

By DEVIN WEEKS
Staff Writer

Losing a body part — a limb, a finger, a breast — is never easy. “When we have parts of our body amputated, there’s something missing,” Stephanie Keaty, 58, of Hayden, said Tuesday. “When breasts are amputated, as in a mastectomy, something’s gone.”

Keaty underwent bilateral mastectomy operations not once, but twice following her initial breast cancer diagnosis in 2005. She opted for reconstructive surgery but had to undergo another procedure to have her implants removed when the cancer returned and metastasized.

“I lived for 11 years cancer free and then in 2019 started having some back pain,” Keaty said.

The best option following the

second diagnosis was to have the prosthetic breasts removed.

“I was flat at that point,” she said. “As a woman, we’re used to wearing a bra, we’re used to having different size breasts at different seasons of our lives.”

She said a lot of amazing women out there choose to forego breast reconstruction following mastectomies.

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"That's who they are, kudos to them," Keaty said. "Cheers to you and how you want to live your life and wear your clothes."

But that wasn't the right choice for Keaty. She prefers the cozier alternative of Knitted Knockers.

"Someone had given me a pair of boobs after I had a bilateral mastectomy the fall of 2019," she said. "That's when I was hooked." Knitted Knockers are handmade knit breast prostheses that fit into regular bras and help women who have undergone removals feel whole again.

"Comfort comes in a lot of ways. In a variety of ways, and the Knitted Knockers to me are my way of feeling comfort," Keaty said.

A local nonprofit, Bag and Boob Babes, specializes in Knitted Knockers. Its volunteers also sew small pillows, drain aprons to store drains and tubes post-surgery, eye masks for waiting room naps and caps to keep chemo patients' heads warm when they are without hair.

Bag and Boob Babes, Corp. Northwest Director Sheila Wayman established the local group in 2015.

"Part of the healing process for me has been Bag and Boob Babes," Keaty said. "It's endearing. You get a little Ziplock bag with a signed note that says Linda or Lulu or whoever made these in Mesa, Ariz., or Florida or Texas or wherever, and you're like, 'Wow, someone's hands have been on this yarn making this neat little pillow of comfort for me.' To me that's super heartwarming and I love knowing that. I visit Sheila often to get a refresh."

Wayman and Keaty have become close friends through the years. Although Wayman has never experienced breast cancer, she is currently undergoing treatment for a different form of cancer and feels for the women with whom her group's sewn and knitted gifts are shared.

"It's like losing your womanhood," Wayman said. "You don't really know until you do experience it. You can empathize with those who are telling their stories, and it's very moving even if we haven't been through it."

"I tell you, a support system is the most valuable thing you could possibly have going through anything physically with your health," she said. "You don't know why it happened. You may never know."

All of the Bag and Boob Babes products are free and sent wherever there's a need.

"We furnish five hospitals in the Denver area," Wayman said. "They really like our products to give to their patients."

Wayman works with the Kootenai Health Foundation to share the items with Kootenai Health's patients. Kali Singleton, donor engagement and stewardship manager for the foundation, said the clinics place orders that are sent to Wayman.

"When women are going through this very vulnerable time, those Knitted Knockers are able to help them feel more confident and comfortable," she said. "For Sheila and her volunteers to offer such an intimate thing for these women really makes a difference in how they're feeling and what they're going through."

She said the

foundation is grateful for the work the Bag and Boob Babes volunteers do to fill the specific needs of the cancer community.

"It's just very special," she said.

Mary Hayes, a coxist with Bag and Boob Babes, said she felt the nudge to help when she retired and was looking for something to do with her time.

She always sang her carols, "With love and prayers, Mary. I do it from the heart," she said. "As I'm sewing, I'm always thinking, 'Who's going to get this?' And I hope and pray that they recover or at least they feel peace through the journey."

Wayman said this work is what God gave her to do in retirement.

"It blesses my heart and gives me great satisfaction to know I'm helping somebody," she said.

Keaty, who will indefinitely be on medication, said it's important for women to seek medical care when something doesn't feel right.

"I was running. I was in a triathlon. I was swimming, doing all kinds of fun outdoorsy things, and I was just not feeling well," she said.

"When you look well on the outside, sometimes we're not well on the inside, so I think it's important to trust what we feel."

Constant treatment to keep cancer at bay takes its toll, she said.

"I kid you not — I don't have hair, all the



Elaine Kimball, who continues to knit Knitted Knockers following her daughter's death due to breast cancer, holds a pair of the knit prostheses Tuesday while Bag and Boob Babes Northwest Director Sheila Wayman models a strain apron and matching pillow.

things, but I try not to look sick, and I think that's part of the Bag and Boob Babes thing."

Keaty said, "I want to be appearing as normal as possible. I don't want to look sick."

She said there will come a time when the options run out, but she and her husband are at peace with their lives and faith.

She gets out of bed every day, even when it's a struggle.

"We're all going to die at some point," Keaty said. "I personally have come to a deeper understanding of the value of life, every single day. That's what keeps me moving."



Get Checked

Getting your annual mammogram is one of the most important steps you can take for your health. Idaho ranks near the bottom — 50th — among national breast cancer screening rates.

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Kootenai Health is making easy and fun for women to keep up on their breast health. Pamper Me Pink, a special drive-through event, will be held Oct. 30 at Kootenai Health. Women will be able to schedule their mammograms and receive thoughtful gifts.

Register at pampermepink2024.eventbrite.com or call Kootenai Health marketing and community outreach manager Tobi Willhite at 208 625-5307.