

Necessities Bags Provides Comfort In Traumatic Time

Rosalind Guy - The Daily News

Thursday, August 28, 2008



NECESSARY ITEMS: Linda Reddick packs a bag for the Necessities Bags program. -- PHOTO BY ROSALIND GUY

When a woman learns she has breast cancer, the news alone can be devastating. Throw on top of that news the possibility of losing one or both of her breasts in order to save her life, and the devastation can be much greater.

Not much can be done to alleviate the pain and fear of a woman about to undergo a mastectomy, but there are some small things – things she or her doctor may not think of until she's facing them post-surgery – that can make the healing and recovery just a tad less daunting.

Those things are offered in purple and white canvas tote bags, called Necessities Bags, that local business owner Linda Reddick donates to women who are about to undergo mastectomy surgery.

A bit of comfort

The bags contain the Woman-to-Woman Guide, which offers suggestions on things a woman should do before and after the surgery to help the healing process.

The bag also contains hand-sewn pillows to be placed under the arms after surgery to take the pressure off their chest, lip balm for chapped lips typically experienced from the anesthesia used during surgery, Neosporin ointment, a roll of Lifesavers, bandages and other accessories that provide post-surgery comfort.

Reddick owns Lynn's Perfect Fit in Hickory Hill, where she offers custom-fit bras. She also is CEO of Total Women Body Systems Inc., a nonprofit organization she started last year.

Through the nonprofit organization, Reddick hosts informational seminars about the importance of self-breast exams and teaches the proper way to perform them. But last year, while surfing the Web looking for something to enhance the services she was already offering, she came across a Web site for the Necessities Bags and decided it was something she wanted to offer women in the Memphis area.

She began giving out the bags about seven months ago.

Riddick doesn't have direct access to the women, but gives the bags to her sponsor physician, Dr. Christine Mroz-Blair, of the Breast Cancer Clinic in the physician's building at St. Francis Hospital.

To be able to offer the bags, Reddick had to find a physician who would agree to give the bags to their patients.

Riddick takes about 10 bags at a time to the clinic.

Riddick recently received a \$5,000 grant from the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation that allowed her to approach two more physicians about providing the bags for their female patients. She's yet to receive confirmation from either of the physicians, but said she is hopeful she'll be providing bags to them within the next couple of weeks.

Keeping spirits, dignity

Necessities Bags Inc. is a Ridgefield, Conn.-based nonprofit organization started by Maureen Lutz after she had a mastectomy in 2005. Lutz said she was looking for something that spoke to the specific needs of the mastectomy patient, but found nothing.

Everything focused on dealing with things such as chemotherapy. And though she does not want to downplay the trauma of having to go through chemotherapy, mastectomy can provide its own trauma.

"But no one really focuses on this trauma, which is losing your breast," Lutz said. "Not every woman has to go through chemo. I did not, but I lost my breast. It was very traumatic for me and I felt that there was no specific support to help me get through the challenges of this surgery and at the same time keep my spirits up and keep my sense of dignity."

The items in the bag are important too, she said, because the patients really aren't able to care for themselves and being able to anticipate beforehand what will be needed provides some semblance of comfort for the women. It also helps them feel like they can control something about the process.

Something as small as the water bottle is important because it can be filled with water and placed in the bed beside the patient, because she won't be able to lift her arms to reach for the pitcher of ice beside her bed.

The information guide, which was written by Lutz from her own experiences, provides information the surgeons and nurses may not address.

“The information booklet alone can guide you through the preparations for the hospital and preparing your home for when you come home,” Lutz said. “That’s the essence of the bag. We bookend your care, we don’t really go beyond the few days after surgery, we focus on the period just before your surgery and the period when you come home.”

Lutz said when she started offering the bags, she had no idea it would stretch as far as it has. It’s because of women like Riddick that it has.

“I had no idea that when I started this in Connecticut that there was nothing like this anywhere,” she said.

The bags currently are offered in 10 states; Riddick is the only affiliate in Tennessee.

Riddick estimates that she will have distributed about 300 bags by March.