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Kristina Alderdice, project director for the local affiliate of **Necessities Bag** Inc., packs a variety of wound-care and personal-hygiene items, including soft T-shirts, in canvas bags for women undergoing breast surgery.

Photo By Jennifer L. Boem of The News-Sentinel

Survivor Passes Along Necessities

Jennifer L. Boem

Necessities Bag project gives breast surgery patients practical items for recovery process.

Kristina Alderdice's days were filled with diapers, dollies and dirty dishes in July 2006.

A 1-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter kept the then-33-year-old Fort Wayne woman's life hectic but happy. The nagging pain in her left breast was brushed off as a bruise or hormonally related.

"I never checked my breasts. I was young and busy with my children," Alderdice said. "Besides, I'd always been told breast cancer isn't painful."

But the small lump was cancer, already spread to three lymph nodes under her arm. Life was turned topsy-turvy in days: a biopsy; then removal of the breast with cancer; and a choice made to remove the other breast to ensure the very aggressive form of cancer she had would not show up later in that breast.

During the ensuing weeks of chemotherapy, Alderdice wondered what the future would hold. She found support and strength in her faith and family as she recuperated and started chemotherapy.

It was during chemo that she read an article about **Necessities Bag** Inc., a nonprofit organization started by a Connecticut breast cancer survivor, Maureen Lutz. The more Alderdice read about the practical items given through the organization to women facing breast surgery, the more she knew **Necessities Bag** was a project she wanted to bring to Fort Wayne - and she has.

Necessities Bag of Fort Wayne and Northeast Indiana is a new program of the Associated Churches of Fort Wayne and Allen County. The local

organization got its start through a \$17,300 gift. The money was given to Associated Churches' executive pastor the Rev. Vernon Graham, who received the cash award when he was honored in June with the Maxine Rippe Award for exemplary service to the community. Graham is Alderdice's father.

The mission of **Necessities Bag** is to provide supplies and information for mastectomy patients and to help surgeons and nurses prepare their patients for the hospital experience and recovery at home. **Necessities Bag** canvas bags contain a variety of wound-care items, personal hygiene items not usually given for free at the hospital.

"Each **bag** costs about \$50 to put together," said Ellen Graham, who is working alongside her daughter to gather and sort the items, package them in zipper-lock plastic bags and deliver them to surgeons and hospitals in the areas.

To date, 116 have been delivered, but a call came in this week from the surgical floor at Parkview Hospital for 20, Ellen Graham said.

What is so special about **Necessities Bags'** bags? The items included - along with tips for what to take to the hospital, what a woman will need for the trip home and other post-surgical suggestions - are clearly those things that only a woman who has undergone breast surgery would know are essential.

For example, among the most practical things are men's undershirts, which help hold bandages in place without irritating the surgical site. Because of short stays in the hospital these days, most women go home with drains still attached near the incision.

"They're soft and stretchy. You can step into them and pull them up," Alderdice said, holding one shirt from a three-pack that will be placed in a **Necessities Bag**. After surgery, "I couldn't move my arms. I wish I'd known about these (shirts)," she said.

Some lingerie or medical supply stores sell camisoles that serve a similar purpose, but Alderdice said they are quite expensive. When no longer needed, an inexpensive undershirt can be thrown away without guilt.

One tip included in the lists of practical advice is to wear a blouse or shirt that buttons in the front. Alderdice said no one made such suggestions to her, and she couldn't wear for the trip home any of the clothing she initially took to the hospital.

The large, sterile bandages placed in the bags are an item Alderdice said she could not find at a neighborhood drug store. Two 11-inch-by-11-inch understuffed pillows packed in each **bag** are also items Alderdice said she would have benefited from greatly.

The pillows, which Alderdice makes using donated fabric and polyfill, give comfort when placed under the arm or between the car seat belt and the chest.

The canvas bags, which have the **Necessities Bag** subtle purple logo on one side, don't shout out the message "breast cancer patient." Alderdice said that is important. Particularly during the first weeks and months after surgery, coming to terms with the fact cancer is now a personal reality is difficult.

The first time she and her mother drove to Cancer Services of Northeast

Indiana for some assistance, "I couldn't go in. I saw that word cancer."

Nearly two years have passed since then. The project has taken off more quickly than Alderdice anticipated and the seed money from her father's award is quickly being used up. She and her mother have made application for funding from the Susan B. Komen Foundation.

Although Alderdice did not have a **Necessities Bag** when she had her mastectomies, taking on the start-up and leadership of the **Necessities** program in Fort Wayne has been healing, she said. Reading through some of the thank-yous sent by local women who have received the bags also is good medicine.

"So many people gave to me," she said. "It's my way of giving back."

How to help

Necessities Bag of Fort Wayne and Northeast Indiana, 602 E. Wayne St., welcomes donations of money for purchasing the canvas bags and personal-hygiene items that go in them. Anyone giving \$50 can have his or her name included on a donor card inserted in the bag.

Items needed

Other items people can donate include:

- * Three-shirt packages of men's 100 percent cotton sleeveless undershirts in size medium or large
- * Cottonelle or Scott pre-moistened towelettes
- * Individual rolls of Lifesavers candies
- * Large, pretty, blank note cards
- * First-class stamps
- * Soft cotton fabric to make comfort pillows
- * 1-inch-wide grosgrain ribbon
- * Quart- and gallon-size zipper-sealed plastic bags
- * Lip balm

Information

Call Kristina Alderdice or Ellen Graham at 422-3528 or go to www.associatedchurches.org.

Jennifer L. Boen covers health and medical issues for The News-Sentinel. She can be reached at 461-8416 or by e-mailing jboen@news-sentinel.com. This column is the personal opinion of the writer and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinion of The News-Sentinel.