



Bag Lady

She helps breast cancer patients by giving them the necessities

By Jessica Goldman

Ellen Mack is one of the few people who can call her career her “bag” without sounding like a swingin’ ’60s throwback. As the executive director of the Sacramento chapter of Necessities Bag, Inc.—an organization that provides totes filled with creature comforts for women undergoing mastectomy surgery for breast cancer—Mack is far more than a bag lady.

“Necessities Bag is a woman-to-woman support network,” Mack says from her tidy East Sacramento workroom off her garage. “Because we’re not a healthcare affiliate, these bags are all about women reaching out and doing things for each other.”

Though Mack’s branch of the nationwide nonprofit is not connected to a particular healthcare provider, institutions such as Sutter, the University of California, Davis Medical Center and Mercy are helping Mack get the word out by giving the bags to their patients.

“The best thing we did was contact Mary Pare, the breast cancer navigator at Sutter,” Mack says. “She connects us with the patients who are about to go through the surgery so they can have everything they need.”

Mack says Pare was particularly helpful when Mack underwent her own bilateral mastectomy in July 2005. As a recent transplant from her native Connecticut, Mack didn’t know anything about breast cancer care in the capital when she first moved to town.



Ellen Mack is executive director of the Sacramento chapter of Necessities Bag Inc., a nonprofit organization that helps women who undergo mastectomies

“The house [my husband Frank and I] had bought was still empty,” Mack recalls, “and the movers wouldn’t be there for another two weeks. We drove in one morning, and that afternoon I had my first appointment at Sutter [to discuss the surgery].”

Mack could have used her own Necessities Bag during her ordeal—which started with a diagnosis the day after her 50th birthday—but at the time, the Sacramento chapter didn’t yet exist. It wasn’t until an article in *The Sacramento Bee* caught her

eye that Mack noticed the niche that needed to be filled in her new town.

“Strangely enough, the organization is based out of Connecticut,” Mack says, “but I didn’t know about it when I lived there. It wasn’t until I moved to California that I got involved.”

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Mack did more than get involved. She contacted the parent organization and, after six months and piles of paperwork, was the proud founder of the Sacramento affiliate, the only branch of Necessities Bag, Inc. in Northern California.

“[Founding the branch] was the only way I could help women without being by their bedside,” Mack explains. “I can’t nurse them, so as a layperson, this was something I could do to make a difference.”

Make one she has. With her cadre of volunteers, a generous grant from Macy’s West and individual donations, Mack’s bags reach scores of patients who, just like Mack, need comfort in their time of crisis. The totes are equipped with everything from stationery for taking notes at medical appointments—“it’s amazing how much stuff there is to process,” Mack

says—to tank tops that accommodate post-surgery paraphernalia like drains and bandages to wipes, tissues and ointment. But Mack’s favorite items are the colorful pillows, two to a bag, that her volunteers assemble by hand.

“You don’t realize how uncomfortable you’re going to be until you go through it,” Mack says, “and having that extra little support really helps.”

In an age before Necessities Bag, Mack got her sole support from Frank, her husband of five years.

“We’ve been through a lot together in a very short time,” Mack says. “It was a first marriage for both of us, and between moving cross-country and my diagnosis, we’ve gone through some stuff.”

Which is not to say that Mack isn’t one tough cookie. At age 17, she went to work as a color separator artist at an engraving factory until machinery made her job obsolete. Then the feisty, doe-eyed brunette climbed behind the wheel of a big rig—one of the first women to do so—and started her own tractor-trailer business,

which had her driving loads for moving companies through 48 states and parts of Canada.

“I had the opportunity to get paid to travel,” Mack says. “I got to see all different kinds of people in all these remote places, from Southern mansions to the Everglades, often on four hours of sleep.”

Since then, Mack has framed pictures, managed offices, trained as a docent at the California State Railroad Museum, returned to her artistic roots by taking pastel classes at the Sacramento Fine Arts Center, and brought Northern California women care and comfort in the face of cancer—even in the face of her own.

“The best day will be when I don’t have to give out these bags anymore, when we have a cure,” Mack says. “But in the meantime, they remind you that you’re not alone.”

To volunteer, request a bag or donate, contact Ellen Mack at (860) 214-9972 or sacramento@necessitiesbag.org. For more information on the organization, visit necessitiesbag.org. ●