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ALL LISTINGS

Vehicle for change
Breast cancer survivor helps patients heal

By AMANDA CUDA acuda@ctpost.com

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Maureen Lutz's life is a series of before and afters. Before, and after, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Before, and after, she established Necessities, a non-profit organization that provides bags of supplies for women undergoing breast cancer surgery.

Before, and after, she was recognized for her work on the ABC chat show "The View" with a brand new Ford Escape.

That last one is the biggest "before and after" in the 58-year-old Ridgefield resident's life. Everything that's happened to her in the past two years is symbolized by the pale green SUV, which she used last Thursday to transport a fresh batch of bags to the Norma F. Pfriem Breast Care Center's Fairfield office.

The bags were packed with goodies geared specifically to breast cancer patients — like lip balm (to treat lips left dry and chapped by anesthesia) and bandages, to dress surgical wounds. Though she's had the car only a month, Lutz has already put 2,000 miles on it ferrying these bags to women preparing for the life-changing experience of breast cancer surgery. The car is more than a vehicle, Lutz said.

It draws a line of demarcation between who she was before breast cancer, and who she is now. "That was my old life," said Lutz, a former Fairfield resident. "This is my new life." Her new life began when Lutz was diagnosed in 2005. When the time came for her mastectomy, Lutz discovered she was hopelessly unprepared for the surgery. She woke up from the procedure, and, horrified, realized

she was virtually immobile, incapable of doing something as simple as lifting a cup to her lips for a drink of water. Her helplessness devastated her.

"You feel humiliated when you can't take care of herself," Lutz said. "Women like to be in control, and breast cancer takes control of your life."

It seemed to her that someone should let women know what to expect from breast surgery. Someone with experience should offer a hand to guide them through the process. Someone like her.

Inspired, Lutz wrote down all the things she'd wished she'd known before her surgery, such as which clothes were most comfortable on her newly tender body (men's undershirts), and took her findings to her doctors.

Lutz told them she wanted to share this information with other breast patients, and the doctors responded enthusiastically, particularly her plastic surgeon, Dr. David Passaretti of Darien.

Passaretti said, though doctors try to properly prepare patients, they have limited time and resources. Also, the experience from that perspective.

most of them aren't breast cancer survivors, and haven't seen the experience from that perspective.

Lutz, however, knows exactly what is going to make this difficult time easier for patients. "She knows what they need and can tell them why they need it," Passaretti said.

He connected Lutz with Katie Greenberg, 54, of Stamford, who had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer and was about to undergo surgery.

The two women made a lunch date. Lutz brought along a bag of items she thought Greenberg could use, which included not only lip balm, bandages and men's undershirts, but also things like moist towelettes that women can use to clean themselves if they are unable to take a shower.

Lutz even wrote a pamphlet with tips for getting through the surgery, such as the proper way to pack for surgery, and how to prepare your home for your recovery. "She was very honest about what would happen," Greenberg said. "She wanted me to have what she didn't have."

The items proved useful, particularly the undershirts. "I love them," she said. "It was so easy to put them on because they're stretchy."

The package Greenberg received became the template for the bags Lutz distributes now. Since Necessities began, Lutz has made about 350 bags and distributed them to hospitals all over the state, and a few in New York.

Women have embraced the idea and some recipients, like Greenberg, are so grateful for Lutz's help, they've returned the favor, buying supplies and assembling bags. She was doing just that at Lutz's Ridgefield office Thursday, along with two other "bag ladies," Gail Johnson, 45, of Norwalk, and Lisa Heist, 47, of Trumbull.

Like Greenberg, Heist and Johnson are big fans of the bags. Heist first heard about Necessities through Passaretti, also her plastic surgeon, when she went in for breast surgery about a year ago, and said the items were a big help.

She particularly liked the water bottle and Lifesavers. "When you wake up, your throat is all scratchy," Heist explained.

Heist and Johnson didn't meet Lutz until recently because Greenberg is the only woman Lutz has given a bag to personally. Since then, Lutz delivers bags directly to surgeons and support staff who pass them on to patients. Her hope is that doctors and nurses will use the bags as an opening to discussions that she never had with her doctors. "We want to create a conversation," Lutz said.

Once Passaretti pointed her in the right direction, Lutz quickly branched out, contacting other health facilities, including Norma Pfriem. The center, which also has an office at Bridgeport Hospital, was established in 1999 to offer clinical and community outreach services to women battling breast cancer.

Sally Cascella, the center's senior clinical nurse educator, receives Lutz's deliveries, and said the bags have won raves from patients. "I've had women get so emotional when the bag is given to them," she said. "There are things in there that seem simple, but you know they're going to comfort them."

Meanwhile, Lutz's circle of bag ladies is expanding, mostly due to her new car and appearance on "The View" in October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month. That came about after Greenberg nominated Lutz as a "Warrior of the Week," a partnership between ABC and the Ford Motor Company's Warriors in Pink Initiative that recognizes women who fight against breast cancer.

According to the American Cancer Society, nearly 213,000 women in the United States were diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006.

Lutz was invited on the show and was presented with a new Ford Fusion. When "View" moderator Rosie O'Donnell asked what she thought of the car, Lutz replied that she could use something bigger to deliver her bags. Maybe she could have an Escape?

She got it through Miller Ford in Fairfield on Nov. 30, and the car — which she calls "The Warrior" — is the perfect way to transport her packages. Plus, turning up on a national TV show has boosted Lutz's profile. "A lot of people saw it and tracked us down," she said.

Many sent in monetary donations and letters of appreciation, which added to a growing pile of support Lutz was receiving. A number of local women were already sending in donations, ranging from \$5 to \$250. Others donated time, including a Ridgefield sewing group, which recently volunteered to make pillows for the bags.

The development Lutz is happiest about is the fact that women throughout the country are looking to create their own branches of Necessities, including former Rocky Hill resident Ellen Mack, 51, who now lives in Sacramento. Mack moved to California in July 2005 and a month later she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Like Lutz, Mack felt completely unprepared for her surgery, so when she heard about Necessities, it struck a chord.

"There are certain things she provides that I wish I had when I had my surgery," she said.

Mack contacted Lutz, who connected her with a nurse in Sacramento. Lutz sent both women a Necessities bag, and the two plan to use it as model to create their own program.

Lutz couldn't be happier that her little project is on the verge of becoming a franchise. She said she's amazed that something that started with so much confusion, loneliness and pain has evolved into something positive.

This is all part of her "after," and she wants to share it with everyone. "This is my gift to whoever wants a piece of it," she said.

For information about Necessities, visit www.necessitiesbag.org, or call Lutz at 894-1479.

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