

Niagara Falls woman helps develop functional fashions for breast-cancer survivors

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Sandra Tullio-Pow wanted to bridge the gap between fashion and function when it comes to the clothing worn by post-surgery breast-cancer survivors.

The director of Ryerson University's MA Fashion program, along with three other colleagues, developed a nightgown specifically geared toward survivors of breast cancer. "We went into this with the hope that this simple solution will make these women feel better about themselves, have better body image, improve self-esteem, and (we're) also hoping that the fabric works from the perspective of better sleep quality," said Tullio-Pow, who lives in Niagara Falls.

Working with Kirsten Schaefer, a graduate of the Ryerson Fashion program, and Dr. Joyce Nyhof-Young, a research scientist at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto, Tullio-Pow helped design the nightgown after hearing from breast-cancer survivors about their difficulty in finding body-appropriate sleepwear.

The project's origins date back to 2006, when Tullio-Pow was working with Nyhof-Young and doing research on the needs of breast-cancer survivors who had developed lymphedema. It became clear to Tullio-Pow that these women wanted sleepwear tailored to their needs and that they were having trouble finding it.

In 2010, Nyhof-Young, a team of medical students, and Schaefer met with focus groups comprising 18 post-surgery breast cancer patients. At this point, participants were asked to discuss a number of things including their "clothing challenges," Tullio-Pow said.

"Basically they were looking for sleepwear that looked like what they wore regularly," Tullio-Pow said. "Not something that your grandmother would wear."

The sleepwear is already winning accolades. At the International Textile and Apparel Association's annual conference in Philadelphia last week, the nightgown won first prize in the professional category for excellence in design for a specific target market.

The gowns, sold under the label Sweet Dreams Studio, are designed with several post-surgery issues in mind, Tullio-Pow explained. Among them, the fact that many breast cancer survivors wear a breast prostheses. Because of this, the nightgown features a jacket with a hidden pocket. The breast prostheses can be placed in that pocket.

In addition, the draped collar also conceals a missing breast, Tullio-Pow pointed out.

As well, the gown includes a lace insert that covers the cleavage, she said.

Scarring from surgery also factored into the design. Because post-surgery survivors often have scarring in the armpit area, the nightgown was designed so that the armhole would be shaped to cover those scars.

There are four versions of the nightgown, each version differentiated by its fabric.

The fabric is vitally important, Tullio-Pow notes, explaining that the fabrics were chosen not only because of their style and comfort, but because of their wicking capabilities. Wicking refers to a fabric's ability to transport perspiration away from the body. It's an important design element because of the hot flashes experienced by women undergoing cancer treatments, she said.

"That's what we looked at when we went to choose the fabrics to make the nightgown out of," Tullio-Pow said.

The black micro-tensel jersey knit, fuchsia bamboo spandex jersey knit, and blue supima cotton interlock knit are each priced at \$125. The black bamboo cotton jersey knit is \$95.

Tullio-Pow said she'd like to see the price of the nightgown come down, but at the same time, the pricing depends on the level of interest. The nightgowns are manufactured in Scarborough and to bring the labour costs

down, more gowns would need to be ordered.

What Tullio-Pow is hoping for is for a retailer to mass produce the nightgowns and for each one sold, pay a royalty to the creators.

With this in mind, the team has courted several retailers and is awaiting feedback.

"It's not unreasonable for Canadian-made," Tullio-Pow said of the current price. "I'd like to see it in the \$75 range, ideally."

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