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- SPORTS
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Cancer survivor starts business

By SARAH E. MORAN



Staff photo by Larry McDevitt Barb Gunselman shows off some finished Bella Bandanas.

WEST GOSHEN — Barb Gunselman is so enamored with wearing sparkly stuff, her husband Rob often suggests she wear a rhinestone jumpsuit and just get over it.

Her love of the flashy stands the ebullient and energetic Gunselman in good stead with Bella Bandanas, the new business she runs from her home here.

She designs and makes chic bandannas in 11 colors and outlines the classic designs with Swarovski crystals.

New to her lineup is the Bella Band, a headband made from the same fabric and studded with crystals.

She made her first Bella Bandana when, completely bald from chemotherapy and tired of silk scarves that slipped off her head or wigs that made her head feel like it was in a vise, she designed her own sparkly bandanna to wear to a Christmas party.

"I was feeling so ugly," she said. "I was desperate to feel pretty again, and this really helped me."

Mind you, these bandannas aren't only for cancer patients. They can be worn as a fashion accessory or to keep hair and perspiration off one's face when exercising.

Same thing for the headbands Gunselman just started making. Ready in a month will be similarly jeweled bandanna fabric belts.

Diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer last summer, the 43-year-old Gunselman experienced two surgeries, 12 weeks of chemotherapy and seven weeks of radiation. Sixteen days into her chemo treatment, her shoulder-length dark brown hair started to fall out in clumps. Rather than experience that indignity, she invited a few friends over for champagne while her husband shaved her head.

She is now cancer-free but must take medicine and have numerous diagnostic tests to make sure she remains that way.

Each bandanna takes 20 minutes to complete. On her interactive Web site (www.bellabandana.com), customers pick out their bandanna as well as crystal colors.

Once she receives an electronic order, Gunselman, who has four teenaged children with her husband, glues crystals to the fabric with Aleene's Jewel-It Embellishing Glue, a fabric glue that holds the crystals firmly in place.

The bandannas may be hand-washed or machine-laundered on delicate cycle and then machine-dried. If a crystal falls off, Gunselman will replace it.

The bandannas, which range in price from \$30 (the "Mimi," with 40 hand-set crystals) to \$55 (the "Madison," with 93 hand-set crystals) come in colors that run the gamut from pink and turquoise to lime, purple and black.

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Chester County shops and salons also sell them, among them the Jane Chalfant and Kiki Boutique, the Calista Grand salon and spa, the ACAC spa, La Difference salon and day spa and Annabella's in Paoli.

She also sells from the gift shop of www.breastcancer.org, the Internet breast cancer support and education organization founded by Dr. Marisa Weiss, her radiation oncologist.

Should Gunselman become inundated with orders, she plans to hire Baker Industries in Malvern to assemble the scarves for \$3.50 each. Baker Industries is a nonprofit work rehab program for the disabled, recovering substance abusers, parolees and the homeless.

Right now, she works 20 hours a week on her new business, retreating to her immaculate lower level workshop when she has work to do or needs a break from the hustle and bustle of four teenagers, a husband and several dogs.

She just mailed a Bella Bandana to "Live with Regis and Kelly" co-host Kelly Ripa. And she'll appear in October on TV's Style Network during Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

Gunselman is clearly a woman who passionately believes in what she's doing. She donates 5 percent of sales to breast cancer research. And, as she put it, "When I get a new shipment of crystals, I get so excited. It's like they're a shipment of diamonds."

Her hair is now about 2 inches long and newly curly where once it was straight, but Gunselman still chooses to wear a bandanna most days. "In some ways, I'd feel lost without one," she said, smiling.

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