



Far left: Terri DuPont, left, Pat Bidwell, and Shirley Kistner collect chemo caps that will be donated. Left: Paula Smith taught her granddaughter Audrey Patterson, 6, how to knit, just as she taught many of the Head Huggers volunteers.

# Caring comes with each stitch

By ANN WEBER  
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## Women gather to knit and crochet chemo caps for cancer patients

No, hugs won't make anyone well. But if hugs make someone who is sick and weak feel warm and loved, that's plenty good enough.

That's why women with knitting needles, crochet hooks, and what seems like miles of yarn are sitting around tables in the Vintage Coffee Bistro in Lambertville on this snow-swirling April night.

They're making hugs. These take the form of soft, fitted caps for cancer patients who have lost their hair to chemotherapy. Some are heartbreakingly child-sized; the smallest, doll-sized caps are for premature infants.

"I've been very blessed in my life, so to be able to give back like this has meant everything," says Rebecca Backus, who founded the group a year ago this month. It's called Vintage Head Huggers — named for Vintage Yarns in Lambertville, one of the group's major benefactors — and is one of 51 satellites of the Maryland-based Head Huggers charity that was started in December, 2001, by Sue Thompson, a retired physician.

"I have a lot of energy and I feel best about myself if I feel that I am contributing somehow to my world," Dr. Thompson explains via e-mail. "I love to knit, crochet, and sew, so this idea of making chemo caps fit my needs perfectly. There are no quotas, there is no pressure. I just wait until I have a box filled and then I pick a place to send it."

Back in Lambertville, about two dozen women who have come out for a recent meeting take turns reporting on their production of knitted, crocheted, and sewn fleece chemo caps: 16 from this one, 8 from that, 6 from another, an impressive 28 from yet another. Some members hold up knitted, crocheted, or fabric squares that will be joined to form "lapghans" — downsized afghans that are used by people in wheelchairs.

As each cap-maker completes her report, she drops her offerings into the collection. They fill one bag, then another. Mrs. Backus announces a total for the month of 126 caps, pushing the output to 1,497 for their first year — solid, multi-colored, striped; plain and embellished; baby pastels, candy brights, soothing browns and blues, go-with-anything white. Some are no-nonsense, made for warmth rather than wows. Some are silly — those made from "fancy fur" yarn in hot pink and other eye-scorching colors are especially popular with kids.

Most of the caps are made with acrylic yarn; wool is avoided because some people are allergic to animal fibers and because wool can be scratchy on tender scalps. Some materials are donated by yarn shops and yarn manufacturers, while much of it is purchased by the members.

Tagged with a label that provides the name of the maker, washing instructions, and fiber content, the caps are sent to the Toledo Clinic Oncology Group, Toledo Children's Hospital, the Victory Center, That Special Woman, Bixby Medical Center in Adrian, and Flower Hospital. The lapghans go primarily to Flower Hospital and Hospice of Northwest Ohio, Mrs. Backus says.

The group that started with six to eight women now has 40 members and will overflow into a second local satellite in Perrysburg in June.

Member Anita Bydlowski of Ida says she became involved in Vintage Head Huggers after a heart attack killed her 24-year-old daughter, Denise, who was known for her good deeds. Mrs. Bydlowski immersed herself in charity projects, working six to eight hours a day, as her health permits, "to heal my heart for my daughter."

The chemo cap project also is intensely personal for member Terri DuPont of Lambertville, whose husband, Randy, is a cancer survivor. "We felt very alone and on our own at times when we were dealing with it," Mrs. DuPont says. She hopes that people who get a cap "realize that someone they've never even met supports them and cares about them."



Left: The chemo caps are tagged with the name of the maker, washing instructions, and fiber content. Above: Rachel Day works on a hat. Her mother and grandmother also knit for patients.



Anita Bydlowski of Ida, right, shows other Vintage Head Huggers a quilted 'lapghan.'

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