

Solutions • Making a difference

Tip of hat to cancer volunteer

Milliner raises funds, self-esteem with chapeau-related projects

By Susan Gembrowski
STAFF WRITER

Diana Cavagnaro wanted to do something for a friend with cancer, so the milliner did what she does best.

She designed a hat. Not just any hat, but a soft, stylish chapeau that looked good on a bald woman and

felt good on a tender scalp.

In the nine years since then, Cavagnaro has donated hundreds of hats to people with cancer.

She taught some women with the Mormon Church to use her patterns to sew free hats for cancer patients and burn victims, when they were looking for a service project.

In addition, Cavagnaro gives 20 percent from the sale of her \$14 patterns to the American Cancer Society. And she donates thousands of dollars raised at

SEE Hats, B3



Diana Cavagnaro who runs her business, Designer Millinery, out of an artist's loft downtown, designs hats specifically for male and female cancer and burn patients who have lost their hair and have tender scalps.
Laura Embry / Union-Tribune

► HATS

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Annual parade raises funds for kids with cancer

a yearly Easter Bonnet Parade and Hat Contest to UCSD Medical Center's programs for children with cancer.

The seventh annual event in the Gaslamp Quarter downtown is scheduled for March 30.

"I'm hoping someday I won't have to do this," she said, "that they'll come up with a cure for cancer and I can go on to doing something else."

That day can't come soon enough for Cavagnaro, whose father died of liver cancer in January.

Looking good

Eight women gathered around a table in a cramped room at Alvarado Hospital to learn how to look and feel better while being treated for cancer. During the three-hour session organized by the American Cancer Society, they learned to apply makeup to conceal skin discolorations and to tie scarfs with flair to cover balding heads.

Michele Cowan-Hernandez, a nurse with breast cancer, volunteered as the group's model.

"I hear as chemo progresses, I'm going to look worse and worse," Cowan-Hernandez said.

Cavagnaro and the other volunteers were determined to prove her wrong.

After Cowan-Hernandez's makeup was applied, Cavagnaro took over. In minutes, she tied scarf after scarf on her model's head, including one made from the bottom half of an old T-shirt. She put it on Cowan-Hernandez and twisted it twice for a three-dimensional look.

"Oh, that is nice," Cowan-Hernandez said.

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Cavagnaro showed the women how to use shoulder pads to give the look of hair under a scarf and how to tie scarfs under hats to conceal baldness.

At the end, Cavagnaro gave each of the women one of her "Softops" hats.

Although most of her hats go to women, Cavagnaro designed a line for men when her father, Robert Cousins, was diagnosed with cancer. She named it the "Bobcap" for him. The design is popular with snow boarders, who buy them through Cavagnaro's for-profit, custom-made hat business, Designer Millinery.

For children's caps, she uses cotton material with rabbit, frog, cow, car and soccer ball designs.

"The thing that is so sad is that there is a demand for this for kids," Cavagnaro said.

Easter hat contest

Later this month, Cavagnaro and her husband, George Bates, will set up tables and chairs inside a circus-style tent for the Easter Bonnet Parade and Hat Contest.

The couple almost single-handedly finds corporate sponsors, celebrity judges and material donations for the event. Some 50 youth volunteers from the Mormon Church in Ramona, along with dozens of others, will help out.

"She and her husband work hours and hours bringing a little happiness into the lives of people," said Janet Forrester, a youth leader at the Ramona



Diana Cavagnaro, who donates hats and a percentage of the sale of her Softops pattern to the American Cancer Society, worked on a hat in her millinery shop. Laura Embry / Union-Tribune

church.

Participants can pay to decorate hats. They can choose from straw, baseball and other caps and decorate them with flowers, bugs and berries. There are clowns, face-painting, a silent auction and an

Easter egg hunt.

Cavagnaro, the event founder, and Bates, the co-chair, raised \$5,000 in 2000 and \$2,500 last year, even after one sponsor backed out. All proceeds go to the UCSD Medical Center's Department of Pediat-

rics Hematology/Oncology Program.

"It feels so good to be helping these kids," Cavagnaro said. "I just love it."

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LOCAL

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● Cancer patients offer a "hats off" to Diana Cavagnaro, who donates her time and skills to help them look and feel better. B1