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HEALTH: Ridgefield breast cancer activist is honored on The View

By Chipp Reid



Maureen Lutz of Ridgefield, second from left, received the Warrior of the Week award from The View host Rosie O'Donnell Monday in New York. Joining Lutz are her daughter, Kristin Lutz Fernandez, right, and Katie Greenberg, who nominated Lutz for the award.—ABC Photo/Heidi Gutman

Anyone who meets Maureen Lutz learns right away there are energy levels, there is passion, then there is Maureen. A breast cancer survivor and passionate spokeswoman for what women need when they undergo a mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, Ms. Lutz is a whirlwind of energy and hope and a symbol of how one resilient person can make a difference. "I'm just a regular person," she said. "Really, I am, but I guess people are right when they say that when you get breast cancer, it changes your life."

It certainly changed Ms. Lutz's.

After working as a fund-raiser for various nonprofit organizations, Ms. Lutz decided to start her own group so she could help other breast

cancer patients from her own experience. It had nothing to do with encounter groups or discussion forums. Her help is far more basic. It is all about Necessities, the name she chose for her organization.

Necessary Necessities

Necessities Inc. hands out the Necessities Bag, a canvas bag filled with small items women need before and after breast cancer and reconstructive surgery. She began in October 2005, just two months after she had reconstructive surgery following her own mastectomy. Today, she delivers more than 50 bags per month to breast cancer doctors who, in turn, pass them on to patients.

Yet Ms. Lutz is more than just a "bag lady." Her own experience as well as her passion to help others combined to make an eloquent – and energetic – advocate for women going through what she calls "painful, frightening, and very emotional experience that leaves you feeling vulnerable, exposed and confused."

Her Necessities Bag "gives you a road map," she said. "It's something you can do when you can still drive, change the sheets on the bed or carry a bag of groceries, because one thing is sure, you can't do that after the surgery."

Ms. Lutz also said her bags help "create a dialogue between doctor and patient. It prompts questions and I think it compels a doctor to think more in terms of what makes a patient's recovery a success."

Her tireless work in raising funds for the bags and finding doctors willing to work with her earned her more attention than she ever thought. Last year, she gave her first bag to Katie Greenberg of Stamford, who faced a mastectomy. The bag – its contents and the fact Ms. Lutz took the time to prepare it – so overwhelmed Ms. Greenberg she vowed to help in any way she could.

Secret nomination

It was over the course of helping Ms. Lutz that Ms. Greenberg read about the Warriors in Pink program. The Warriors in Pink is a Ford Motor Corp.-funded program that honors women who have taken on lead roles in the fight against breast cancer. The Ford program raises money for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

Part of that initiative is the Warrior of Week, a month-long recognition of women who are at the forefront of the fight against breast cancer. Ms. Lutz knew nothing about the program. She also had no idea the Ford program recently partnered with the hit ABC daytime talk show, The View, to honor one woman each week in October. And, she really had no idea Ms. Greenberg nominated her as a Warrior.

She found out Sept. 25 when she got an e-mail telling her about her nomination.

"I had absolutely no idea what it was about," Ms. Lutz. "I just get this e-mail saying I've been nominated for this award."

By Sept. 27, Ms. Lutz learned she was one of six women up for the first Warrior of the Week award – selected from literally thousands of other nominees. On Sept. 29 she was in Farmington, talking to a group about distributing the Necessities bags when she got a call from her husband, urging her to return one particular phone call.

"There I was driving at 65 mph talking on the hands-free in the dark on roads I don't know and I find I am going to be on The View," Ms. Lutz said.

On 'The View'

On Monday, she was in New York on an all-expense paid trip to appear on The View alongside Rosie O'Donnell, Joy Behar, Barbara Walters and Elisabeth Hasselbeck. For Ms. Lutz, simply hearing the nomination letter Ms. Greenberg wrote as she prepared to go on the air was emotional enough.

"I was the very first recipient of a Necessities Bag," Ms. Greenberg wrote. "Since then, Maureen has managed to put a bag in the hands of over 175 grateful women. I am in awe of Maureen and what she does to make life easier for women diagnosed with breast cancer."

"I couldn't believe the letter," Ms. Lutz said. "But I knew I only had four minutes so I had to keep myself focused and what I wanted to say."

One thing helped her in that task. Ms. Lutz said the producers literally locked her in a room "with an intern at the door!" She said she had no idea why – even the TVs around her room were off.

She found out when she went out stage. Ms. O'Donnell showed Ms. Lutz a 2007 Ford Fusion covered in the Warriors in Pink logo. The car, Ms. O'Donnell said, was hers.

"They gave me a car!" Ms. Lutz said. "I couldn't believe it. A car."

What happened next was even more unbelievable for Ms. Lutz. Ms. O'Donnell asked Ms. Lutz how she would use the car, and Ms. Lutz replied she would deliver Necessities Bags with it. One thing Ms. Lutz noted, however, was she could deliver more bags in a bigger car.

"I only said it in passing. It was chitchat," she said. "When Rosie asked me what kind of car did I want, I said something like an Escape or an Explorer."

Ms. O'Donnell went into the audience, stood in front of the Ford representatives and them, "Maureen needs a better car. What can you do for her?"

Without hesitation, the Ford reps agreed to provide Ms. Lutz with a vehicle she could use for her work.

"I was absolutely in shock," she said. "It was just so unbelievable."

Now cancer-free for more than 16 months, Ms. Lutz said her experience on The View served to strengthen her resolve to get the Necessities Bag into the hands of even more women.

"This started off as an idea, and the idea became a vision," she said. "The vision is to share the idea."

For more information about the Necessities Bags, please call 203-561-6038 or log onto www.necessitiesbag.org.

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