

# New BODY, New LIFE

## Kalamazoo's "cozy" place for breast cancer survivors

BY ANDREW DOMINO

At Kalamazoo's Beautifully Unique shop, breast cancer isn't something to be ashamed of — it's a part of life to be celebrated.

"If you help one woman, she'll tell 10," said Debbie Laure, retail manager at Beautifully Unique, 2004 Inverway Court, near West Hills Athletic Club. "Even if they're not breast cancer survivors, they know someone who is."



In many cases, treatment for breast cancer requires surgically removing one or both breasts. It's part of a woman's figure that's difficult to go without, so there are options, like silicone or even soft foam in the shape of a breast. The prosthetics can be inserted into specially constructed bras, nightgowns, swimsuits or other clothing. Prosthetics and bras are available in medical centers and from online stores — but they may not have the right size or shape to conform to a patient's body. That's why Beautifully Unique opened its doors.

According to the American Cancer Society, breast cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer death in American women. More than 40,000 are expected to die of the disease this year. About one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetimes.

The store was opened in 2015 by owner Helena Borski. She, along with Laure and manager Debbie Hnilo, is a certified mastectomy fitter with the Board of Certification, a not-for-profit group for prosthetics suppliers. That gives them the skills to create an artificial breast (or pair) for their patients, and to bill Medicare for the prosthetics. Before that, Beautifully Unique could only charge cash to their visitors. With the certification, they can help their patients handle insurance payments for the fittings.

Beautifully Unique offers not only the breast prosthetics and the clothing to carry them (about 30 different sizes and colors of bras are available in the store), but accessories too, including hats, scarves and jewelry. Offering everything from help with the finances to something fun to wear was always the goal for the store, Borski said.

"We want to make it so they don't have to run to a bunch of stores, because they don't have the energy," she said.

A customer's relationship with Beautifully Unique starts as soon as they are diagnosed, Hnilo said. In the early stages of treatment, women are given drain pouches to collect fluids being released from their bodies. The store sells camisoles to cover up the drain pouches and make the woman look "even." The store also offers compression garments that wrap around arms to keep fluids from pooling there.

After a patient fully recovers from treatment, it's time for a return trip, this time to get fitted for their new prosthetic breasts, if they're not getting reconstructive surgery. This is a life-long relationship; Hnilo said the prosthetics last about one to three years, and the technology to make the artificial breasts feel and look authentic is always improving.

Borski said part of the job is helping women feel comfortable with this major change in their lives. She's not just a clothing store owner; there's a little bit of therapy that comes with helping a woman get fitted for a prosthetic.

"We made our place more homey and cozy," she said. "Women are very self-conscious. We have a little coffee and tea bar; they can just come in and talk."

Hnilo said she has seen women with a variety of reactions to the fitting. Some cry. Others want to be left alone in the changing room. Another customer goes to fittings with her husband, who picks out the kind of bras he wants to see his wife wear. She said the store is also planning support groups later this year. They are also promoting the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer walk, October 15 at the Arcadia Creek Festival site.

Hnilo, a breast cancer survivor herself, said Kalamazoo was an ideal place to open a store like Beautifully Unique. There's no store like it in the area — the nearest is in Grand Rapids — and the clothing needs of a woman recovering from breast cancer surgery are different than most women.

"You can't get (prosthetics and bras) at the mall, and even if you could, it wouldn't be covered by insurance," Borski said.

For women facing financial hardships, the store offers a small selection of donated prosthetics, bras, wigs and other items. Laure said in October, the store will be getting a scanner app that can electronically measure and shape the prosthetic to each patient's post-surgery body.

So far, the store has a handful of visitors each day, though Borski, Hnilo and Laure have been talking with local medical suppliers and hospitals about sending patients to Beautifully Unique. They want women to be comfortable with their new way of life.

"Even before they have surgery, they can come in and talk to us," Borski said.

"We can explain the options — it's not all 'bulletproof bras.'"



You can see more of Andrew Domino's writing at [www.dominowriting.com](http://www.dominowriting.com)



## CHIP CHICK (WITH I)

PHOTOGRAPHY AND RECIPE

### Chipotle Chick

Makes 5 to 6 servings

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 chicken breasts
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- 1 orange bell pepper, diced
- 1 chipotle chili in adobo
- 1 (12 oz) bottle lager beer
- 1 (14.5 oz) can fire roasted tomatoes
- 1 (14.5 oz) can black beans
- 1 (14.5 oz) can kidney beans
- 1 cup water
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 2 teaspoons salt
- Optional shredded cheese and sliced avocado, for garnish

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over high heat. Once the oil is hot, cook the chicken on both sides for 5-6 minutes, then remove the chicken from pot.

Add the garlic and onion to the pot and cook until translucent. Add the chipotle chili and cook for 5 minutes, stirring often. Pour half the beer into the pot. Stir and scrape the bottom of the pot. Add the rest of the beer, tomatoes, beans, cumin, paprika and salt.

Nestle the chicken breasts into the pot and bring the chicken to a boil. Heat and simmer the chicken for 10-15 minutes.

Some ingredients may vary by region.

Beautifully Unique