

## Gaila Fund distributes stylish hats to women with cancer



**Gail Arch, who was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer in November 2007, designed the prototype for the Gaila headdress.**

By Jody Feinberg  
The Patriot Ledger  
Posted Apr 13, 2010 @ 12:50 PM

When Patty Tsoumas goes out, she wears a colorful turban on her bald head. It invariably attracts comments. “(A) waitress said, ‘I’m just fascinated by that headpiece,’” said Tsoumas, 67, of Hull, who lost her hair last summer after treatments for stage III ovarian cancer. “I said, ‘You’ll be more fascinated when you find out what’s going on underneath.’”

Joking aside, Tsoumas said the hat, called a Gaila, is helping her live fully. She now feels good about going out in public. That wasn’t the case, she said, when she wore wigs, which felt uncomfortable, and scarves, which slipped off her head, virtually announcing her cancer.

“I had so much trouble finding something that worked, but this hat takes me where I need to go,” said Tsoumas, who recently retired as project manager for R. Mullen & Associates of Hingham. “I don’t look like that I don’t have hair, and it’s a great fashion accessory.”

Tsoumas has six Gailas, but she received her first one for free from the Gaila Fund, a new Hingham-based nonprofit that manufactures and sells the regal headdress and offers a free one to every woman who has lost her hair because of illness. The name Gaila is a play on three words: gala, gele (the Nigerian head wrap on which the Gaila is modeled) and Gail, the Milton professor of international business who designed the prototype to give as gifts to fellow cancer patients.

“We wanted the name to convey this positive attitude that this isn’t about illness,” said Sarah Adams, executive director and a founder of the Gaila Fund. “It’s about life and fashion and women feeling good.”

The creation of the Gaila Fund is a story of what can happen when women get inspired to help a friend, and strangers donate money and skills to make life better for sick women.

Gail Arch, 57, was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer in November 2007, 19 years after her initial diagnosis. At the time, Arch, of Milton, directed the Master of Business Administration Program at Curry College. In late 2009, she resigned, after the cancer treatments left her without the energy to continue in that role. With free time, she started sewing hats from the fabrics she had collected on her international travels.

When her friends stepped in, her small project became a much larger enterprise.

“I call it the transformative power of female friendship,” Arch said. “My friends had been very concerned about how I was going to keep busy. When they saw my hats, they said, ‘We can do a lot more with this.’ ”

And they did. In about 15-months, the Gaila Fund for Women with Cancer was created by Adams and two other close friends of Arch’s, aided by volunteer business professionals and donors. So far, the fund has given away about 100 hats and has a stockpile of about 1,000. In the fall, the Gaila Fund plans to offer educational programs to help women cope with the financial and career issues raised by their illness.

“When I was faced with leaving my job, it struck me so vividly that I was fortunate to have long-term disability as income replacement,” Arch said. “I know a lot of women don’t have that. The programs can help them address their new financial realities.”

In the meantime, the Gaila Fund launched its web site in January. People can see many images of and order the bold and colorful head wraps. The cotton ones sell for \$38, and the silks and blends for \$45, prices that subsidize the free-hat program.

“We’ve been able to get very beautiful, vibrant fabrics at very reasonable cost,” said Arch, who remains involved in fabric decisions. “The hats can be shaped in various ways depending on how a woman wants to wear it.”

Similar to the Nigerian gele, the Gaila wraps around the side of the head. It can be tied in the center or on the side and can be flattened or raised. The web site has instructions and a video to guide people on how to adjust the hat.

“When it’s just hanging there, it looks like a ‘Little House on the Prairie’ hat,” Adams said. “But when people get it on, they see how pretty it is.”

There are 48 fabrics available, and these change regularly because the Gailas are made in small quantities from fabric bolt ends in a factory in China. This process helps keep keep down the cost.

“All the Gailas are made in a factory that adheres to a code of ethics, which is very important to me,” Arch said.

That factory also manufactures clothes for Talbots and J. Jill, and Arch is enormously grateful for the business help offered by Ken Feldstein of Norwell and Ann Barres of Hingham, both former Talbots executives.

The Gaila Fund also received assistance from the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), Brenda Adams of Adams Design, and many others who donated start-up funds and other skills.

“I had no idea that a couple of hats I made would turn into something much bigger than we expected,” Arch said. “I’m feeling overwhelmed actually, because people have offered to help so much. I’m tearing up.”

Reach Jody Feinberg at [jfeinberg@ledger.com](mailto:jfeinberg@ledger.com).

READ MORE about this issue.

#### Gaila Fund

A fundraiser is scheduled for 3 to 6 p.m. April 25 at The Snug, North Street, Hingham. Tickets are \$50 and can be purchased at the door or by e-mail at [info@gailafund.org](mailto:info@gailafund.org).

To learn more about The Gaila Fund, go to [www.gailafund.org](http://www.gailafund.org).