

From photography to sewing: one Fisherville resident on staying essential during the pandemic



FISHERVILLE—Shown above are products sewn by Melanie Steeves, including masks for residents (left) and for health care workers surgical caps with buttons sewn on for masks to attach to, or “ear savers” that can be used with any cap (right). —Submitted photos.

By Kaitlyn Clark
The Haldimand Press

FISHERVILLE—When Ontario locked down and Melanie Steeves’ business, Topline Design Photography, was deemed non-essential, Steeves saw this as an opportunity for “some extra time to help out in other ways”.

“I started to sew to help out after seeing a request from Kathryn Stengel of the Haldimand War Memorial Hospital. She was asking for crafty people to make and donate surgical caps to the hospital,” said Steeves. “I cut out the pieces required for the caps and from the smaller scraps of fabric left over I started to create non-medical face masks for those people who wanted a little bit of extra protection when they had to go out in public. It was a way for me to use up as much of the fabric as I could.”

Steeves first gave these masks to her family and friends, but requests then began to roll in through social media, particularly from people looking for ways to help protect their elderly loved ones.

“All of this also led into creating the ‘ear savers’. These are a small strip of ribbon with buttons sewn on each end,” explained Steeves. “Those that have to wear masks for eight to 10 hours a day could slip the elastic behind their head and onto the buttons of the ear savers, instead of wearing them traditionally behind their ears. This reduces the open sores that people were getting behind their ears from the hours of wearing their personal protective equipment (PPE) masks.”

To date, Steeves has donated approximately 70 surgical caps and 120 ear savers to Haldimand War Memorial Hospital. A nurse from Hamilton Health Sciences requested a donation as well, and Steeves mailed 25 caps and 15 ear savers.

As for masks, Steeves helped sew 168 masks for a project organized by Shawna Sherk of One Stop Home Staging, who was in need of sewers to transform the materials she had to make 500 masks for places that did not receive PPE products. Additionally, Steeves provided 25 masks to Community Living Haldimand, as requested by Megan Helder, for staff members to wear in group homes when assisting clients.

“A rough estimate for how many have been made for individuals I would say it’s around 100 sewn and delivered with a list of orders yet to be made,” said Steeves. “I am still making and sending surgical caps to the hospitals, and I still have people contacting me for

masks. So I will keep going and at this point I have orders for at least 50 more to be made. But this number changes daily as people contact me.”

With all this practice, Steeves is able to make 10 surgical caps and 15 masks a day from start to finish. If the fabric is already ready to go and just needs sewing, she can make about 45 masks a day as it takes about the same amount of time to sew each mask as it does to cut and iron the fabric to prepare it. Along with the skill, this of course takes time.

“I try to treat this like a new job. I set up my day and work on creating the surgical caps and masks for eight to 10 hours most days,” explained Steeves. “I try and stick to some sort of schedule, or I can get overwhelmed by it.”

So far, Steeves has gone through “a rather large Rubbermaid bin” of fabric and is already “about halfway through a second bin.” She was fortunate in a way to have so much excess material sitting in her attic from her “quilting days” as a teenager.

“Most of it originally came from my mother and grandmother,” said Steeves of her supply. “I learned my skills from my mother. She was a very talented seamstress ... (and) a great number of my childhood dresses were actually made by mom.”

“I have had a few ladies drop off (fabric) material that I do plan to use as supplies diminish.... As for the other things required to make all these items, there have been some wonderful community members to step up and help out. There have been huge donations of buttons and ribbon for the ear savers,” continued Steeves. “Then at one point I looked up at my thread cupboard and realized I had used up most of my own supply of thread. I had about 40 empty spools sitting in the place where once full spools sat. So I put out a request on social media for thread and within a half hour I had what seemed like a lifetime supply of thread show up on my porch. All the thread was donated by ladies in the communities of Canfield, Cayuga, and Fisherville.”

Thanks to these many donations, Steeves plans to continue sewing her heart out so long “as the needs are required”.

“I am not a person who is good with my hands being idle,” concluded Steeves. “When Topline Design Photography had to shut down due to the pandemic, I found myself without any actual job to do. So, I had to find something else to focus on and this felt like the right thing to fill that void left by my business being shut down.”



Melanie Steeves at her sewing machine

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