

## Homemade Masks for Hometown Heroes has helped protect more than 10,000



As the mother of a nurse, the global pandemic has been a particularly worrying time for Lissa Dwyer.

Finding herself in lockdown, worrying for her daughter's safety, and unable to indulge in the hobbies and passions that would otherwise occupy her time, the Aurora woman was looking for a way to channel her energy in a way that was both satisfying and productive.

An avid ?sewist? for a local theatre company, she found a perfect outlet with Homemade Masks for Hometown Heroes of York Region, a collective of nearly 30 individuals who know their way around a sewing needle, dedicating their time and talents to craft nearly 13,000 face masks for individuals and organizations in need across the community.

?Sewing has been always been a way I have been able to give back in different ways,? says Ms. Dwyer. ?For the first couple of weeks, it was a matter of hunkering down and ?wait and see? but my mom is in a retirement home and I ended up making 100 masks for them. After that was done, I found there were lots of other places that needed them.?

This is a reality that Homemade Masks for Hometown Heroes (HM4HH) knows all too well and it is here that Ms. Dwyer found like-minded individuals looking to help in any way they could.

A wide-reaching organization, efforts in Aurora and King have been spearheaded by Maureen Casey, herself the mother of a paramedic.

?I have no sewing talent, but when things completely changed in the world and everything stopped, I just needed something new to do, a new challenge,? says Ms. Casey. ?I hadn't sewn in years, but I borrowed a machine from a friend, who dropped it on my porch ? and it was an easy machine, thank goodness.?

She laughs when she thinks back to those early days back behind the sewing machine, dragging 100 per cent cotton bed sheets out of her linen closet and taking a full week to sew 50 masks when fellow HM4HH members' output was considerably higher.

'My March 30, I had done about 100 masks, I was exhausted mentally because of it, but the group had just exploded,' she says. 'We had no idea; we thought this was just going to be a handful of our friends doing it for the community, but the requests were just coming in like crazy. We had all these people just jumping on board and that is when they decided we needed some extra help. I gladly put up my hand and said, 'I'm not the best sewist, so I think I am better coordinating!' From then on, I just started coordinating and left it up to the professionals to do the rest!'

Coordinating the group, they moved forward with a sole mandate: filling the gap. They saw their work as a temporary stop-gap because, at the time, the wearing of hand-sewn masks was not yet encouraged by public health officials.

'We really had to soldier through for a few weeks when there were people telling us not to do it,' she recalls, 'but the healthcare workers were the ones begging us. We put together a request list that went online, so we were able to track everything and it just got so big. All of our requests were coming from healthcare workers and that was just so telling that even if the regulations and the mandates from governments hadn't caught up yet, we knew the need was there and we were going to be ready to supply it to them.'

Of course, need wasn't expressed solely from healthcare workers. Organizations like the Aurora Food Pantry and Welcoming Arms, which recently received a donation of 100 masks from HM4HH, were also identified and individuals involved in each of these organizations began spreading the word.

'It is really about making a connection,' says Ms. Casey. 'Because Aurora doesn't have a healthcare institution like Southlake where there are hundreds of nurses that can live all over, we had to compartmentalize. If you were making a mask in Aurora we wanted to keep that mask in Aurora. We went down the list and pooled our resources to supply masks where the greatest needs were. It's a matter of digging down deeper and finding those connectors in the community. Once you make those connectors, they already have their organization in place and this just supplements that.'

These connectors have not only helped HM4HH identify where their masks can go, but helped them source material. Organizations like the Aurora Seniors' Centre and several fabric stores have stepped up to the plate with material donations, as have individuals - including a local woman who inherited her mother's button collection deciding it was finally time to let go of the collection so they could be used for hand-sewn caps for first responders, the buttons serving to secure face masks and save the pressure on their ears.

?We had no idea how huge this was going to be and whether hospitals would be overwhelmed,? says Ms. Casey. ?It was a very worrying time. It has almost become the new normal, you feel much more comfortable, although you're still on guard. All of these people who had nothing to do but wanted to contribute and wanted to provide some sort of value and feel as though they were contributing, but they couldn't go anywhere, they couldn't do anything. All we were told was the best way to contribute was staying home, which is true, but while you're at home, what can you do? It provided such a wonderful purpose for hundreds of people who got out their sewing machines and took on a task.

?Although the needs have been met currently, and we feel as though we have met our mandate, we don't know what the future is going to hold in terms of a second wave, so we're not stopping, we're preparing.?

To help Homemade Masks for Hometown Heroes, contact Aurora/King coordinator Maureen Casey at [maureen.casey@hotmail.com](mailto:maureen.casey@hotmail.com).

**By Brock Weir**