



NEWS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

More than 7,700 Face Masks Created by Volunteer Sewers

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY, February 26, 2021 — Just as this past year was filled with challenges, it was also filled with bright moments as community members across Northumberland County rallied together in the fight against COVID-19. One such moment, which sparked many more, was when Jessica Sears signed on to support coordination of a volunteer initiative to create handmade face masks for the use of patients and essential visitors at Northumberland Hills Hospital (NHH) – an initiative that flourished locally thanks to her leadership and the incredible efforts of a small but mighty team of local sewers who produced more than 7,700 masks in just seven months.

Early in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, it quickly became clear the use of face coverings would play an imperative role in helping decrease the spread of the virus, something that holds true today during the continued battle of the second wave. Access to face masks, however, presented a challenge, with concerns of personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages for those on the frontlines causing a need to preserve these materials. With an aim to ensure Northumberland County had access to quality masks, the leadership team at NHH determined early on that a supply was needed to hand out to those with reason to be at the hospital – outpatients attending chemotherapy and dialysis, inpatients upon discharge back to the community, essential visitors, and others.

In stepped Jessica, who's husband, Tom, had heard of this need during a discussion with NHH's Chief of Staff, Dr. Mukesh Bhargava. Jessica is an avid and skilled sewer, and volunteered her skills, testing a sample of blue medical grade material NHH made available to her to sew a prototype and determine the viability of using this material for masks.

Once it was determined the material, typically used to wrap medical equipment during sterilization, could be repurposed to create face masks, the next challenge was to find skilled sewers who could help with their creation. As a regular patron of the Stitch Witch in Cobourg, Jessica contacted the owner, who sent a callout to the store's email list, which was instrumental in recruiting volunteers to Jessica's local team. While many individuals were involved in the Northumberland effort, more than 50 sewers contributed to Jessica's team over its lifetime, with a core group of about 15 local sewers continuing for the full seven months. Jessica coordinated efforts with these volunteers, putting together packages of raw materials that volunteers would pick up from her porch and return as face masks, which could then be dropped off in bundles at NHH, where they were sterilized for distribution.

"The number of people in Northumberland who were willing to sew with this specialized material just amazed me," shares Jessica. "I was a stranger to most of the volunteer sewers originally, but we all meshed and came together for a good cause. We had no idea the severity this pandemic would have on our community, but this was one way we could use our skills to try to help. Knowing we could contribute in a useful way was so important, and the camaraderie and friendships that developed in the group are something good that came out during a challenging time."

The design for the masks was based on specifications outlined in a template developed by the University of Florida and discovered as a result of research into face mask patterns and effectiveness conducted for NHH by Dr. Kaes Al-Ali, general surgeon. Throughout the seven months of sewing, minor adjustments were made to the original pattern to incorporate feedback from local frontline healthcare workers, the sewers and patients alike.

“We did not know how significant it would be when we started out, but having a dependable, local supply of consistent and high-quality face masks made a huge difference to the critical preservation of our hospital’s medical-grade masks – especially early in the pandemic when concerns of PPE shortages were high,” shares Dr. Bhargava. “In addition to offering early protection to patients and visitors at NHH, the production of these masks provided a sense of togetherness and aligned efforts to help mask our community at a very minimal cost to the system. We can’t thank Jessica, the talented sewers on her team, and all involved enough for their generous contributions.”

In addition to the medical grade material supplied by NHH, two Port Hope businesses stepped in to help source and supply other materials needed as the NHH design was fine-tuned, with copper wire for the nosepiece supplied by Acme Electric, and elastic supplied by Vosburgh Home Décor. Another partner, through a connection of local consultant Colin Davis, supported the cutting of the fabric in the early stages of the project and donated early-stage strap material, while the volunteer sewers gave not only their time, but also took on associated costs to purchase items like thread and special clips needed to avoid puncturing the material with pins.

Regions outside Northumberland eventually took up campaigns of their own, and the spin-off efforts supported communities in Durham, Peterborough County, and Kawartha Lakes as well. Jessica’s particular ‘blue mask’ initiative officially wrapped up in the fall of 2020 when she delivered the last batch of her team’s 7,700 masks to NHH, but the local gratitude for the efforts of every sewer and contributor to this project will long continue. With the provincial supply of masks now stable, NHH staff and screeners are now distributing medical-grade masks to all essential visitors and patients.

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About Northumberland Hills Hospital – Located approximately 100 kilometres east of Toronto, NHH delivers a broad range of acute, post-acute, outpatient and diagnostic services. Acute services include emergency and intensive care, medical/surgical care, obstetrical care and palliative care. Post-acute specialty services (PASS) include restorative care and rehabilitation. Mental health care, chemotherapy, dialysis and 16 other ambulatory care clinics are offered on an outpatient basis through partnerships with regional centres and nearby specialists. NHH offers a full range of diagnostic services, including magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computed tomography (CT) and mammography. The hospital serves the catchment area of west Northumberland County. A mixed urban and rural population of approximately 60,000 residents, west Northumberland comprises the Town of Cobourg, the Municipality of Port Hope and the townships of Hamilton, Cramahe and Alnwick/Haldimand. NHH employs approximately 600 people and relies on the additional support provided by physicians and volunteers. NHH is an active member of the Central East Local Health Integration Network. For more information, please visit www.nhh.ca or follow us on Twitter [@NorHillsHosp](https://twitter.com/NorHillsHosp).

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About the Northumberland Hills Hospital Foundation – The mission of the Northumberland Hills Hospital Foundation is to inspire generous giving to enable exceptional patient care at Northumberland Hills Hospital. With a dedicated team of enthusiastic volunteers and staff, the NHH Foundation is passionately committed to improving health care and the quality of life for people living in west Northumberland. Since 2002, the NHH Foundation has raised over \$61 million to build and equip Northumberland Hills Hospital. This support comes from generous community support through a variety of programs including major gifts, planned giving, signature and third party events, direct mail and commemorative giving. For more information, visit: www.nhhfoundation.ca or like us on Facebook.

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