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An army of local volunteers answer call for face masks

By Pippa Fisher



One of an army of sewers formed in Lafayette to meet mask needs. The Kosla sisters, Audrey and Grace, have been leading production of face masks in Orinda. CAPA moms worked in Moraga on mask production. With help donated from Diablo Foods to the Lafayette volunteers, masks are allocated to various recipients across the area ready for use.

Photos provided

Although the news is dire, Lamorindans across the tri-city area can take pride in knowing that the sense of community is alive and thriving. In Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda teams of volunteers have taken quietly and without fanfare to their sewing machines to churn out large numbers of non-medical face masks for essential workers in the area.

In Lafayette Susan Goldie of Sewnow Fashion Studio said the idea originated from the community. "As the extreme nature of the pandemic was unfolding, I received email after email or tags on my social media account, asking if there was any way we could help make masks," she said.

Goldie explains she started with the medical community but their requirements were not compatible with what they could provide, so she pivoted to designing the best cotton mask they could realistically create. About the same time, Kathy Bowles of the Lafayette Community Foundation and Anne Birdsong at Lafayette Rotary were seeking mask solutions for non-healthcare essential workers in the community. They reached out to Goldie and the Lafayette Mask Brigade was born. Their goal: Identify the organizations in need and then create and deliver up to 2,000 free, reusable face masks as quickly as possible.

Beneficiaries have included Lamorinda Village, Meals on Wheels, Seniors Around Town, White Pony Express and those who work in grocery stores such as Diablo Foods. They are providing masks to those managing critical business for city offices and those supporting clients at Orinda Senior Villages as well as Las Trampas Inc., Monument Crisis Center, Trinity Center, and Loaves and Fishes, Hope Solutions, Chateau Lafayette, Merrill Gardens and Belle Terre senior centers along with Shelter, Inc., and Youth Homes.

With financial assistance forthcoming from the Lafayette Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce, Diablo Foods and the City of Lafayette along with many of the "sewists," within 24 hours Goldie had 40 people signed up to sew. As she developed a high-quality design she brought in three critical new members - local custom tailors Joseph Jamkochian of Creative Alterations and Carlos Gomez of Moises Gomez, and Linda Morris of the Cotton Patch. The core team worked around the clock to pre-cut fabric and create kits of 40 masks each, for "sewists" to complete at home.

Lamorinda Village Operations Manager Kathryn Ishizu is grateful. "These masks will keep our volunteers safe as they work to keep our vulnerable older population safe. This is an incredible community effort and we will all get through this together."

They've been busy in Moraga as well, where Paula Hertel who works in assisted living services says she has seen how hard the caregivers and staff have been working to keep residents safe, engaged and healthy despite all of the obstacles and hardships.

"I knew our Moraga community would rise up and help. My daughter dances at CAPA. I remembered seeing all these women sewing costumes and ballet shoes for the CAPA shows," says Hertel. She reached out to Jen Schnayer, Christy Kutzscher, Laura Finnerty and Christine Curtis, all CAPA "moms," to ask them if they would help. "Christine, a master organizer, made material kits and called on many of the CAPA sewing group to help as well. Our generous community also helped with donating and funding the costs of materials," says Hertel.

In addition, Hertel's daughter Elissa Goldman started a thank you letter campaign for residents and staff at these communities. She raised enough money to send over 150 cards and gift cards to caregivers and hundreds to residents. "The letters they receive remind them that they are valued and not forgotten. The caregivers feel the same way - a cloth mask and a thank you card with a \$5 Target gift card is more than the value of the materials - we see you, we care and we want you to be safe," says Hertel.

Meanwhile in Orinda the community is being led in its efforts by a couple of youngsters - sisters, seventh-grader Audrey, and fourth-grader Grace Kosla, who have so far with the help of friends and family already created over 300 face masks. Close to 20 friends and family members have contributed by making masks, donating materials and giving lessons.

Audrey notes that she has learned the importance of time management and persistence, "It's important to set a deadline and make sure to complete the task at hand."

The Kosla family's masks are going to delivery people, health care workers, numerous charities and other friends and family, they say.

"It's really fun and exciting to help people," says Grace.



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