

Q&A With BFFL Co. Founder Elizabeth Chabner Thompson, MD, MPH

Q. Tell us a little about your company. When, how and why did you start BFFL Co.?

A. BFFL Co. – which means Best Friends for Life – is all about friends helping friends with both the medical and non-medical part of recovery. I started BFFL Co. in early 2011, with a mission to improve the current standard of care during medical treatment and recovery, to help support the healing process, and to optimize the patient's outcome.

At BFFL Co., we develop, package and distribute products that improve the experience and recovery of people undergoing surgery or treatments for cancer or other conditions. The products are purchased by the patients for themselves, by friends and family for their loved ones, or by doctors and hospitals for their patients.

Q. You have a personal story that was part of the genesis of the business. Can you share that story with us?

A. My mother, grandmother and great-grandmother were breast cancer survivors. During medical school I decided to dedicate my life to caring for women, and became a radiation oncologist. After years of vigilant breast surveillance, biopsies and genetic counseling, I underwent a cutting-edge procedure that is now considered pretty conventional – double prophylactic mastectomy and direct-to-implant breast reconstruction. I was a mother of four small children and was really high risk, and didn't want to become the fourth generation of breast cancer patient in my family. After recovering from the surgery, I joined the team of reconstructive surgeons who treated me, to begin helping other women through that decision-making and recovery practices. So at that point I was working at two medical practices, radiation oncology and plastic surgery.

I realized that patients had needs that went beyond just the clinical. There were certain items every person having particular types of surgery needed. There were also questions that every patient would ask, like "What should I bring to the hospital? Why does this surgical bra hit just where my drains exit? What bra should I wear after surgery to optimize the outcome?" etc. I began to make lists of things patients needed to bring to the hospital and I gave these lists to patients. Pretty soon I was packing bags of little things for recovery for my patients. I guess a little seed got planted in my mind that there was a market for this. Next thing I knew, the BFFL Bag® was born.

Q. What exactly is a BFFL Bag®?

A. It's a friend-to-friend care bag containing comfort, medical, personal care and rehabilitation items for hospital patients recovering from cancer and other surgeries or treatments. Unlike the disposable plastic or nonwoven bags of supplies sent home from most hospital stays, the BFFL Bag® is fashionable, brightly-patterned and mood-lifting. It's made of water- and stain-resistant high-quality nylon pack cloth, and it has metal feet, so as not to touch the hospital floor. I spent a lot of time thinking about the little touches and features of the bag that would really say to a patient "you're cared about." The breast bag contains all the essentials for recovery from mastectomy or other breast surgery. We've included everything from a healthy KIND bar for energy and strength to wound care supplies to toiletries to a collapsible water bottle that won't roll off the bed. The highlight of the bag, though, is the axillapilla® comfort pillow. It's made of soft micro-denier fabric and filled with millions of microbeads so it's lightweight and comfortable. It's heart-shaped, so it fits under the axilla, or underarm area, and takes pressure off an area which is

often swollen and sore after breast surgery.

The Breast Bag was the original product, but we very quickly developed additional BFFLBag® styles which are now available. There's an ovarian bag, a TBI/Brain bag for people with brain injuries, a mini version of the breast bag for lumpectomy patients, a Mommy/Delivery, and a Prostate BFFLBag®, and more. We also do customized bags for hospitals and clinics.

Q. Tell us about the Brain BFFLBag®, and how it came to be.

A. I designed the brain bag with my best friend from childhood Sara Kerr Reges, a registered nurse who treats patients recovering from TBI (traumatic brain injury, concussions, brain trauma or stroke). Brain injuries affect over a million people per year – everyone from soldiers in the military to kids playing sports. National Rehabilitation Hospital regularly supplies our bags to their patients.

Q. What other products do you sell?

A. We have a whole line of bras and other garments. I realized that while the surgical and radiation treatment technologies for breast and other cancers have rapidly evolved and, in some cases, even been revolutionized, the garments available to patients undergoing surgery and post-surgery therapy remained stuck in the 1970s. I collaborated with a foundations designer who has worked for 30 years in the intimate apparel industry for all the big companies. Our innovative and patented garments are made using the best performance and comfort fibers and fabrics on the market, and state-of-the-art garment construction technology. Feedback from women has been terrific. Our bras fit better than anything on the market today. We have the Elizabeth Surgical Bra that is put on a woman right after surgery, and bras that she can wear during radiation treatment (one even has a pocket for ice packs), and many more in development that I can't talk about yet. We also offer a line of accessories, mini care kits like our Chemotherapy and Radiation Kits, books, and more.

Q. Who benefits from BFFL Co. products?

A. Patients, doctors and hospitals all benefit because our products really do help patients recover faster, with dignity, and with fewer readmits. Even the consumer product companies that make the various items in our bags appreciate what we're doing because we get some of their best products into the hands of an important consumer segment at an critical, pivotal time in their lives.

I started this company because I knew that patients being treated for cancer and other conditions had needs beyond just the clinical. They needed to feel cared for, comfortable, and empowered. Above all, they needed to be treated in a way that preserved their dignity. When this is understood, everyone benefits.

Q. How can people order BFFL Co. products?

A. Anyone facing surgery or with friends or loved ones facing surgery, childbirth or who have had a brain injury can order products from our website at www.bfflco.com. The website also contains a lot of information, like tips on health, medications, etc. We even have instructions on how to care for your drains in several languages. We also post blogs on key topics in health care at least once a week.

