

# In good shape

Breast cancer affects one in seven women in the UK. But these two entrepreneurs each launched a business making life after surgery better. By **Jane Yettram**

## BOOST BREAST FORMS

Sam Jackman's mother, Sue, had finally had enough. Twelve years after having a mastectomy for breast cancer at the age of 47, she said she couldn't wear her breast prosthesis anymore. 'It was hot, heavy, sweaty and extremely uncomfortable – and she was done with it,' says Sam.

Sam researched alternatives but drew a complete blank. 'Every breast form I found was a different version of the same thing – silicone gel encased in polyurethane, similar in weight to the lost breast, and fleshy in texture and colour.'

Then one day Sue said in exasperation, 'Why does it even have to look like that? I'm not replacing the boob I've lost. I just want something to give me a bit of shape under my clothing. Why can't it be patterned? Why can't it be pretty? Why can't it be leopard print? Why can't it be glittery? Why does it have to be beige and fleshy?'

It was a light-bulb moment. 'All I could think was how right Mum was.'

Sam did some more digging. 'I realised lots of women felt exactly the same.' And Sam wanted to do something about it.

### LISTENING TO WOMEN

She spoke to a friend, Rosie Brave, who was studying for a master's degree in design. 'We worked with 160 women, asking them what they wanted from a breast prosthesis. The answer was something desirable, funky and fashionable, which wasn't a constant reminder that they'd had breast cancer.' But Sam and Rosie didn't have the engineering expertise to design the ideal structure.

Sam applied for an accelerator programme with the Design Council.



Sam with the life-changing design

'We were accepted and got £15,000 of seed funding.'

With this money, they engaged an engineer, Chris Hawken, to work on an open structure that would reduce the weight and allow cooling air to circulate. The resulting design worked well, but they didn't have enough money to cast the prosthesis in soft, wearable silicon. 'All we had was a hard 3D-printed version.'



The soft and comfortable Boost breast form

At the end of the accelerator programme participants could pitch for funding. 'We walked into a room with 12 men in grey suits, telling them we're going to make boobs and they're going to be bright colours and funky designs. They thought we were mad. Our pitch went down like a lead balloon.'

Some financial support did come from public body Innovate UK, but getting more seemed impossible.

'Potential investors kept saying "it doesn't look like a boob, no woman's going to wear it" – even though women helped us design it. Of course the investors we pitched to were always men. So many barriers go up against female business founders, and with a female-centred product it's especially hard.'

Rosie ended up stepping down, and Sam continued alone. 'I worked three other jobs to fund it and managed to get silicone breast forms



Sam and mum Sue

made – squidgy ones women could wear and test.'

Boost finally launched in 2019. 'We started with three sizes – that's all we could afford as each production tool costs several thousand pounds. I had to keep working, working, working as I was funding everything.'

Then Macmillan Cancer Support phoned. 'They asked if we could make an extra-small breast form, an A-cup size, for a young lady who wasn't even 16 yet. We said yes.'

'Engineer Chris went into his workshop and made a rudimentary mould for this special size. We thought extra-small wouldn't be very viable, but it's turned out to be one of our most popular sizes.'

Through customer feedback, Sam realised women wanted bigger sizes too. 'Our size range evolved further, and we're about to offer the Boost Bloom, which will go to an H cup.'

Boost has also given women the funky style they craved. 'We've had hot pink, purple glitter, a beautiful teal... We made a special shimmery one for a young woman's wedding. It was beautiful!'

### CHANGING LIVES

Now Sam is working on a collaboration with the NHS, to make the breast forms available to more women. And her work has been recognised by several accolades, including being one of the top 10 in *The Telegraph* and NatWest's 100 Female Entrepreneurs to Watch. 'I had lunch with the NatWest CEO, attended a women in business conference, and had

**Breast cancer is so disempowering. Afterwards, you need to rediscover yourself**

a special dinner at Coutts Bank where the royal family bank. It was amazing!'

Sam's ethos behind her business has been giving control back to women who've been through breast cancer treatment. 'Breast cancer is so disempowering. Consultants tell you what will be done to you, what appointments you'll attend, what medications you'll take. You have to do what you're told. Afterwards, you need to rediscover yourself.'

Women themselves have shared moving stories about the difference the breast forms have made. 'One lady contacted us to say, "You've given me my best friend back." She told us that swimming had always been the thing they did together every week. After surgery, though, her friend didn't want to swim anymore. Nothing would persuade her – until she bought one of our breast forms. Finally she had the confidence to get back in the pool.'

[www.wewearboost.com](http://www.wewearboost.com)

## VALIANT LINGERIE

It was in 2006, at the age of 19, that Ellie Howie – now 37 – underwent a genetic test to discover whether she had the breast cancer gene, BRCA1.

'My mum first had breast cancer when she was about 31. She had a lumpectomy, and then when the cancer came back she had a mastectomy,' says Ellie.

Ellie's mum's sister was also diagnosed with breast cancer and sadly died aged 34. Genetic testing wasn't widespread back then but a sample of Ellie's aunt's blood was retained. When testing became available, that was analysed, along with a sample from Ellie's mum. Both had the BRCA1 gene mutation.

Knowing she might be affected too, Ellie opted for the test. The result was positive, meaning Ellie had an 80% risk of breast cancer and a 50-60% risk of ovarian cancer. 'Despite being aware of the risk, it was a huge shock. I cried for two days. But at least it empowered me to make choices to minimise my risk.'

Luckily, Ellie had time to talk to medical teams and understand her options. 'I was advised that decisions about risk-reducing measures should be taken by my mid-20s – five years before the earliest breast cancer diagnosis in my family.'

### THE TOUGHEST OF CHOICES

Ellie's decision was to have a double mastectomy and reconstruction with implants at the age of 24. 'Though I'd come to terms with the procedure intellectually, walking to the operating theatre in my hospital gown felt so strange. I was completely well yet was about to have serious surgery. That moment was my biggest wobble.'

More challenges were to come. 'The week after surgery I had lots of pain and felt very emotionally vulnerable.'

Neither had Ellie reckoned with the impact the double mastectomy would have on her self-esteem. 'It really affected how I felt about myself. And not being able to wear certain bras kept reminding me what I'd lost.'



Ellie (centre) modelling the post-surgery lingerie

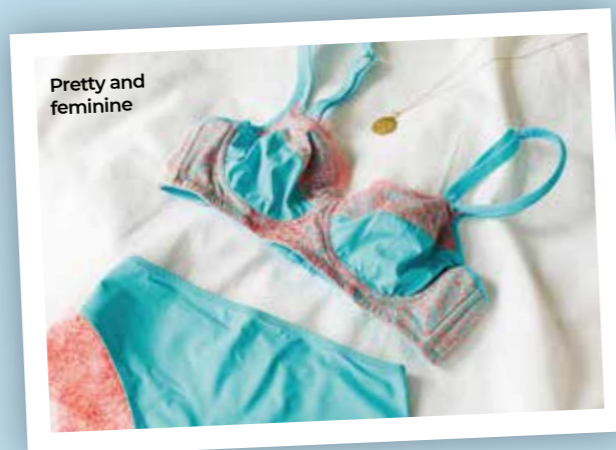
Underwires were out, many fabrics irritated Ellie's scars, and the only post-surgery lingerie she could find, 'looked more like a medical truss. Going into lingerie departments, I'd see all the pretty things in nice colours. Then, tucked away, would be the post-surgery underwear – a sea of beige hidden in a shameful corner. It made me feel rubbish.'

Such experiences prompted Ellie to launch Valiant Lingerie. 'I went into it

quite naively, not understanding the amount of engineering that goes into creating a bra!' she says.

But Ellie connected with a company supporting product design in the lingerie industry. 'They brought deep knowledge of the design process and I brought an understanding of women's needs after surgery.'

The result is underwear that is both beautiful and practical. 'Our bras are non-wired, getting support from



Pretty and feminine

Jade Alana Photography

their underband,' Ellie explains. 'The material is soft, which is better for both scarring and irradiated skin from radiotherapy. They also have pockets in the cups so you can pop a breast form inside.'

'Seams are positioned so they don't irritate common scar locations. Some bras are higher under the arms, making them better for women prone to lymphoedema. Others have wider straps to avoid narrow pressure points.'

Now Ellie's added post-surgery swimwear to the range. And, like Sam, her work has won her several accolades, including being named as one of Small Business Britain's 100 Trailblazing Female Entrepreneurs.

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Most important for Ellie, though, is supporting women who've been through surgery – in the same way she and her younger sister, Francesca, who also had a double mastectomy aged 24, have supported each other.

'No one deserves to feel alone and unhappy in their body. I'm not comparing what I went through with women who've received a cancer diagnosis, but there are similarities in terms of feeling lost and isolated. People like Angelina Jolie have now spoken about risk-reduction surgeries, but when I had mine there was little awareness. That was profoundly isolating. I want to help women feel less alone in this process.'

For Ellie personally, another decision is looming. Because of her high risk of ovarian cancer, she has been advised that risk-reduction surgery – removal of her ovaries – needs to happen at the age of 38-40. 'I've already had my fallopian tubes removed to lower the risk, but I could still get pregnant via IVF. Having children isn't a priority, but I do find the finality of the

**No one deserves to feel alone and unhappy in their body**

next step emotionally challenging. At the moment, if I decide I want children, I could opt for egg-freezing. Once my ovaries are gone, that option is over.'

Ellie's aim now is to help women who've contacted her with different needs: 'For example, those who've had heart surgery and need soft lingerie because of scarring.'

Others need to accommodate a bag after stoma surgery, or an insulin pump if they are diabetic. Wheelchair users want something comfortable but attractive. Those with reduced dexterity want front-opening bras.

'For these ladies, too, purpose-made underwear looks absolutely dire. Products tend to be on medicalised websites, with customers seen as patients rather than women who want something pretty. So I'm working on lingerie that will not only address their needs but help them feel seen and heard and happy in their bodies.'

[www.valiantlingerie.com](http://www.valiantlingerie.com)

Ellie is now working on designs to suit different needs



Anne Thomas Photography