



Specialty shop has far-reaching clientele

There are thousands of clothing stores across our nation, but specialty shops like Virginia's Feminine Boutique are few and far between.

Perhaps that's why this particular boutique serves customers from all over Washington as well as Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Alaska and Canada.

Virginia's Feminine Boutique in Marysville offers a generous selection of custom-fit daytime and full-figure bras and shapewear. Its selection also includes bridal wear, maternity bras and nursing bras along with lumpectomy shells, mastectomy bras and prostheses.

Sizing ranges from 28AA to 56L. Bras can be customized to fit both your body type and your lifestyle.

Clientele come from every aspect of life: The excited bride who would like to wear a body shaper to make sure her wedding dress looks just right. The high-school senior looking for the perfect strapless to wear underneath her prom dress. The busy mom with the aching back and heavy bust line. The frightened cancer patient who is unsure of what she will look like after her upcoming breast surgery.

No matter the reason for her first visit, a guest at the boutique becomes a lifelong customer who brings her mother, sisters, best friends and out-of-town guests – all to get the perfect, comfortable bra.

In 1988, owner Virginia Shipp began the business in her Marysville home after learning the Utah-based store she normally purchased her custom-fitted bras from was about to close. Virginia's new business was, quite literally, the perfect fit for women in Western Washington. Sales zoomed and the store moved to a larger location on Grove Street in Marysville.

A few years later, Virginia's attempt at retirement didn't last long. She received dozens of phone calls from



Virginia Shipp, center, is the owner of Virginia's Feminine Boutique. Her granddaughter Melissa Shipp, left, is the store's office manager. Another granddaughter, Vanessa Shipp, right, is the fitting manager at the store.

clients begging her to keep the store open. A larger shop was in order. This time, Smokey Point was the location. Her granddaughters, Melissa and Vanessa Shipp, were ready to join the team.

Melissa took over the office duties. "In a matter of days, it was like she had been working for me for over 10 years," Virginia said. "It was like a thousand-pound weight had been taken off my shoulders."

Vanessa trained to become a fitter. "It takes a special kind of person to do a fitting," Virginia said. "Almost overnight, Vanessa learned the skills, and women really took to her."

Since then, Virginia's Feminine Boutique has made one more move, this time to a larger, more customer-friendly location just off Smokey Point Boulevard. The boutique has a warm, cozy flair, with hardwood floors and softly painted walls. The fitting rooms are comfortably proportioned and the no-hurry, no-hassle ambience of the store is a welcome change from the cramped hustle and bustle of most retailers.

One step inside, and you know the answer for comfort is mere moments away.

"The difference a good bra makes is huge," Vanessa said. "It can help your balance and your posture, change the way your clothes fit and enhance your self image. A good bra can make you look 10 pounds thinner."

Referrals to the store are made from doctors, chiropractors and physical therapists. "Often, when you wear the right bra, you can alleviate pain and prevent future pain from happening," Vanessa said.

Virginia's Feminine Boutique is accredited with the American Board of Certification for its mastectomy clientele. Thus, as the fitters at the boutique, Virginia and Vanessa have been trained to provide the highest standards of customer service and expertise in the area of fitting women for post-mastectomy products.

The shop not only carries mastectomy bras and prostheses, but also sells post-surgical camisoles for immediately after surgery and leisure bras for the transitional time between a camisole and a standard bra.

Brands include Amoena, Jodee, Ladies First and Tru Life.

Virginia noted that today's prostheses are completely different from the offerings of a few years ago. Gone are the days of uncomfortable breast forms or homemade bra forms made from rice, beans or socks.

Today's breast forms are made from lightweight silicone and come in a variety of shapes, weights and sizes. Climate control forms are also available.

"We can create fantastic fits with today's products," Vanessa said.

For women who have spare post-mastectomy bras or prostheses, Virginia's accepts donated products for local community members. At present, Vanessa is a volunteer with The American Cancer Society and The Providence Regional Cancer Partnership, which help to distribute these donated items to those in need.

Virginia noted that it's a misconception that only large-busted women or women who have had mastectomies need to be professionally fitted. "Everyone needs

that lift and support," she said.

"Women need to realize that one brand's sizing is different from another," she said. "Because we know our products, we can mentally adjust the size and provide the customer with properly fitted bras from a variety of manufacturers."

Virginia encourages women about to undergo breast surgery to walk through her boutique and familiarize themselves with the options. "It helps to place your mind on what you have to look forward to," she said. "You're not going to be wearing some monstrosity; instead you will wear something soft and very pretty."

Appointments are encouraged, but walk-in customers are also welcome.

The store accepts insurance from Group Health, Regence, Premera and several other companies, and Medicare and Medicaid. All insurance billing is done through the store's office. Melissa reviews insurance coverage with each client over the phone or in person, and Vanessa has details about post-mastectomy products for those without insurance coverage. "We don't pay attention to which insurance is used, if DSHS is contracted, or if the customer is paying out of pocket," Virginia said. "We take the time to do special alterations because we really care about our clients and treat them with respect."

■ Virginia's Feminine Boutique
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