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PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS BENSON

Chris Benson, right, chooses bright fabrics for the masks, pouches and hats that women sew for cancer patients undergoing treatment. The projects mean a lot to women from Nepal, Appalachia and Somalia, who help support their families.

GIVING COMFORT

Chris Benson uses her cancer experience to help others

BY RUTH SCHENK | rschenk@secc.org

Chris Benson believes God spared her through stage-four cancer for a reason.

Her husband, Stuart, and their grown daughters are a prime reason. But so are the thousands of other cancer patients who deal with the side effects of chemotherapy, isolation, discouragement and fear.

"When people first hear the word 'cancer,'" they are so afraid," Chris said. "I was diagnosed at stage four. I survived, and now I have purpose in life. I want to give people hope. Cancer isn't an automatic death sentence anymore."

By the time doctors found Non-Hodgkins Follicular Lymphoma in January 2007, it was in Chris' chest, small intestines, abdomen, spine, skull and bone marrow. She researched the best cancer treatment centers in the country and asked God to open the right door.

She began a clinical trial with six rounds of chemotherapy at MD Anderson Hospital in Houston, Texas. Tests show she is in remission.

"I believe God has given me a chance to help others on their journey," Chris said. "I used to be afraid of cancer patients. I felt awkward. But now I'm blessed to have a story to share."

Listening is key. So is encouragement. When several friends battled cancer, Chris created Blessing Bags filled with things that matter to those going through treatment. Things someone who has never battled cancer wouldn't understand.

She put in Lemon Heads candy to help with the taste of chemotherapy chemicals, special creams to help with dry skin, oncology mouthwash, a new toothbrush, a CD full of Scripture for encouragement, Don Piper's book *90 Minutes in Heaven*, a craft project and puzzle book to fill waiting time. She created bright masks that soften the fear factor of contracting an illness when treatment compromises the immune system.

Every three weeks, Chris and Stuart

flew to Houston. She was wearing a mask in the airport when the story about swine flu broke on television, and she watched as crowds moved away from her.

"I wanted to shout that I was not contagious. I was wearing a mask to protect myself from others," she said.

Chris later made her own masks with fun fabrics, and "people didn't run away."

Sandy Wooley's Bible study group gave her one of Chris' Blessing Bags as she battled cancer.

"That bag meant so much," Wooley said. "It was full of practical, wonderful things that made my life easier at the time. I still use the notebooks for my records. I loved the flowers that friends sent, but this lasted so much longer."

As friends battled cancer, Chris made more and more Blessing Bags. Each one was custom designed and filled with items not found in stores or hospitals: bright reusable masks, soft knit caps in a variety of patterns and colors, pouches with sanitizer and lotion, and an indexed carrying case for medical and gift cards.

She started Better Days Designs based on Jer 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Since she can't sew all the projects, Chris pays others to help her. Sewers include Nepalese women who need the income, women in Appalachia, students, grandmothers and women from Somalia.

"My goal is for it to be a blessing to those who make the items, as well as those who receive them," Chris said.

Southeast member Karen Aroh, who works with Nepalese women, said they are so proud of their contribution to the ministry, and the money they make per piece helps them care for their families.

"I believe God spared me to do this," Chris said. "I pray every day that He uses me up and that He'll be glorified."

For more information about Better Days Designs, go to www.betterdaysdesigns.com.