

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.



'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.'



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



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