

# THE NEXT CHAPTER FOR *Barbara's New Beginnings*

In the past decade Barbara Gilbert has built a thriving business to serve women. What's next?

article by Lynette Bleed • photo by Steve Vorderman

**T**here are reasons why butterflies adorn the sign of Barbara's New Beginnings. "I've always loved butterflies," says owner Barbara Gilbert. "They symbolize new beginnings."

Ten years ago, Gilbert was coming off of two years of bed rest as a result of four surgeries for a congenital pancreas condition. Each surgery resulted in an extended hospital stay where she met several women who had recently undergone mastectomies.

"I felt bad for them and when I left, I couldn't forget them," says Gilbert. Combining her compassionate nature with her retail background as a buyer, she opened a small, 400-square-foot shop in Fort Wayne—a "cozy, comfortable, place," where women could be fitted for breast prostheses and bras without embarrassment or stress—and called it Barbara's New Beginnings.

Gilbert has received extensive training in all areas related to breast prosthetics and proper bra fitting. Early on, she studied with a woman from New York City who had owned and operated a similar shop for 50 years. She's also completed educational programs with several breast prosthetics companies. On the operations side, she had to learn how to negotiate contracts with health insurance companies and how to comply with Medicare regulations.

One of the hallmarks of Barbara's New Beginnings is the customer service from a thoroughly-trained staff.

"Our staff trains for at least three months before they work independently with customers and they help each other with fits," says Gilbert. "If a customer doesn't feel comfortable with her fitter for whatever reason, she can request someone else."

This personalized service accommodates a range of customers' varied needs for

proper fitting bras or prostheses. For some, it is health reasons. A proper fitting bra, for example, can improve a woman's posture, which in turn can aid in digestion and help alleviate back problems. For others, it's aesthetics, they like the fun bra designs with matching underwear.

Customers range from ages 9 to 99. "We fit girls for their first bras and elderly ladies who are in wheelchairs," says Gilbert. Often, bridal parties will schedule fitting parties after regular store hours. Then there's the customer who broke out singing, "I feel pretty, oh, so pretty," while in the dressing room (she turned out to be the lead singer of the Indianapolis Philharmonic). And sometimes, there is the incognito skeptic wearing a straw hat and sunglasses—a writer who later e-mailed Barb and said, "I can't believe my life was changed from a bra fitting."

In May of 2009 Gilbert expanded her business to the Indianapolis market by opening a store in the suburb of Zionsville. The venture originated from a large clientele that traveled to Fort Wayne solely to shop at Barbara's New Beginnings. She says the response has been "more than she ever thought." She attributes the quick growth to word of mouth, magazine advertising in the Indianapolis market and a great reputation.

Gilbert's debut in the Indianapolis market has garnered her much publicity. She recently won the Starkey Entrepreneurial Woman of the Year Award, and as a result, will be featured in the December issue of *Indianapolis Woman* magazine, as well as being interviewed on "Indianapolis Style" (a TV show) scheduled to air in coming months. In March of 2010, Gilbert was



Owner Barbara Gilbert started Barbara's New Beginnings 10 years ago in Fort Wayne.

one of 10 storeowners chosen by a vendor to provide design expertise at its plant in Germany. And in August, Barbara's New Beginnings was named in the top 25 Bra Shops in the United States by *Intima Magazine*.

"This job is so fun and rewarding," says Gilbert. "I always think about opening more stores in the back of my mind." •

## Barbara's New Beginnings

**Address & Phone:** 4705 Illinois Road  
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46804  
(260) 432-9939

20 West Pine Street  
Zionsville, Indiana 46077  
(317) 733-4100

**President/owner:** Barbara Gilbert

**Number of employees:** 13

**Website:** [www.barbarasnewbeginnings.com](http://www.barbarasnewbeginnings.com)

**Years in business:** 10

**Products and Services:** Bras from AA to N and matching underwear, band sizes 28-56 inches, cup size swim wear and cover-ups, sports bras designed for runners, tennis players and every day activities, shape wear to 15X, Mastectomy bras and prosthesis (we file insurance claims), strapless bras and corsets to J cups, handbags, jewelry and many more gift items, professional bra fittings and complimentary prosthesis information and much more!