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Bridget A. Barrett

Claire Rewold, from left, Gretchen Drader, Jill Drader Skrzynski and Karen Chase are partners in Chao Pelo Design, a company that makes headwraps for women.

Metro Detroiters' wraps turn enough heads to get noticed

By Michael H. Hodges / *The Detroit News*

ROCHESTER HILLS -- It's the story of four determined women, one good idea, yards and yards of exotic fabric, and an unexpected market that materialized out of nowhere.

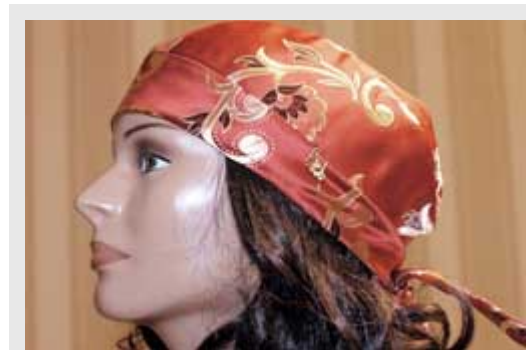
The initial brainstorm was simple.

Gretchen Drader loves to ride her Harley. But after hours on the open highway, she'd stop and look at herself in a mirror.

"And, omigod," she says, laughing. "Helmet hair."

So she snagged her buddy Claire Rewold, who's a wiz with a sewing machine, and the two of them began designing luxurious headwraps you could slip right over that damaged 'do, and still feel at home in an elegant restaurant. And that's how Chao Pelo -- Spanish for "Bye-bye hair!" -- was born.

When they peddled their headgear at local fairs during the last year, Drader says, women who'd gone through chemotherapy kept rushing up to demand, "Where were you guys when I lost all my hair?"



Models such as this "Kristen" design reversible red silk head wrap range from \$30 to \$60.

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And that's when they realized their little haute-couture headwraps might serve a more socially useful purpose than they'd anticipated. Because, as anyone who's gone through it will tell you, women who've lost their hair don't have a lot of attractive options.

"When my mother was going through chemotherapy, she just hated the wigs, hated the turbans," says Karen Chase, the group's bookkeeper who wishes their product had been around back then.

In Royal Oak at Gilda's Club, the cancer-support organization, program manager Michelle Warren says, "It's important for women to be able to put something on their heads that they think is gorgeous -- it's a way to pamper themselves during a really difficult time."

It doesn't stop there. Other niche markets keep popping up.

Convertible-cruising moms are snapping up the wraps, while macho lawn-care guys demanded their own model, complete with sweatbands to keep the sweat out of their eyes.

Depending on fabric and style, prices range from \$15 to \$60.

They can be luxurious indeed. At the high end, you might be looking at an elegant headwrap made of black ultrasuede edged with French zebra silk ribbon.

All Chao Pelo models are reversible, and each comes with the company's signature talisman -- a tiny silver or gold hand waving goodbye.

The quartet behind this venture is approaching various high-end shops, as well as Target. A patent is pending. And, while they've been doing all the cutting, sewing and ironing in their living rooms and kitchens so far, they're looking into farming out the labor.

Orders threaten to swamp them.

"We were up till 2 a.m. last night," says Drader with a weary laugh.

Intrigued? You can get in touch with Chao Pelo at chaopelo@aol.com, or by calling sales manager Jill Drader-Skrzynski at (248) 981-2290.

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