

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

'The Boob Lady': She's on a mission to create the breast 'owner's manual'

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P-I REPORTER

Elisabeth Squires doesn't want to be known as "The Boob Lady" forever. But for now, she'll own that title, thank you. Squires is writing an unofficial owner's manual for girls and women who want a one-stop spot for all their burning questions about their breasts, from "sprouting to sagging."

She's calling it, "bOObs: A Guide to Your Girls." It's girls gone real.

Her mission: educate and empower breast owners, especially girls whose junior high phys-ed experience shapes their body image. Her lesson: They should be comfortable in their own skin.

The book aims to be a veritable breast fest, a single repository for information and resources about how breasts change over a lifetime, how different societies imbue them with non-sexualized symbolism (think nurturing and nursing, not Frederick's of Hollywood). It tackles mammograms, breast-feeding, breast cancer, plastic surgery, trivia, bra fittings and "mammoirs" -- stories from women about their breasts.

Her Web site, booksonboobs.com, offers a good sneak preview of the information she hopes to pass along. The book, due for publication next year by Seal Press, a division of Avalon Books, aims to give women what they need to make informed choices when it comes to the orbs of tissue and fat that grace their torsos.

"I was sort of a boob about my own boobs," said Squires, 50, of North Seattle, mother of three -- including a teenage daughter -- and the daughter of a breast cancer survivor.

She didn't start out as The Boob Lady.



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MERYL SCHENKER / P-I

Elisabeth Squires talks about breast health and bras to eighth-grade girls at the Seattle Girls School. Squires wants to educate and empower breast owners.

A creative-writing class unearthed her feelings about her breast lift surgery two years ago and the impact it made on her life.

"For most of my life, my breasts would arrive in the room before I did," she said.

After nursing and raising those children and getting into shape, she underwent a breast lift -- a surgery that removes excess flesh and moves the nipples up -- and for the first time, she felt like she had breasts that aligned with her petite body.

"Finally, I'm comfortable with me," she said.

Squires holds a degree in political science but has devoted the past 20 years of her life to raising a family with her husband, attorney Randy Squires, and being a community volunteer and fundraiser for arts groups and schools. She is a former president of the Patrons of Northwest Civic, Cultural and Charitable Organizations (PONCHO) and an advisory board member of Treehouse, an organization that supports foster children.



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MERYL SCHENKER / P-I

Jazz Brandon, center, Katherine King, left, and Emerson Lynch, right, all 13, listen to Elisabeth Squires, who wants everyone to be comfortable in their own skin.

The warm reception that creative-writing exercise received prompted her to try pulling together a book of "mammoirs" -- stories in which women share their thoughts about their breasts.

She did her research and bought a library of breast books, including one she calls the bible of breast books: "Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book."

Squires also talked to oncologists, lingerie shop owners, plastic surgeons, bra fitters, and women and girls who wanted to share their stories. The more she talked to all these women, the more she realized that what the world didn't need was another book compiling those stories.

"What women really needed is an owner's manual. They need to hear from experts how to put their best breast forward," she said. Searches revealed books about vaginas (plays, even), penises, the history of the breast, pictorials and mammoirs. But there was no overview resource that included practical advice. "There was no Boobs for Dummies."

Squires may be quick with the puns, but she is dead serious when it comes to reorienting the image of breasts.

"They're not the end-all be-all but they are the things that define us as women," Squires said. "They're out there all the time. They define our sex, but it isn't who we are."

Although Squires herself had plastic surgery and is open about that, she doesn't take either side in her approach, advocating a be-happy-with-who-you-are perspective that does *not* discount well-thought-out improvements.

Plastic surgeons she talked with appreciated Squires' outlook.

"I think it's about time that someone like Elisabeth writes a book on breasts. It seems that so much of the information out there is issue-driven and written by those with a bias, usually against cosmetic breast surgery and sometimes even against reconstructive surgery after mastectomy," said Dr. Lisa Sowder of Seattle.

"Also, so much media coverage focuses on breast implants when in fact there are other procedures such as breast lift and/or reduction that also can enhance appearance and self-esteem."

Squires writes about her experience in a tassel-twirling class -- some of which she blogs about under the topic, "Taking the girls out (for a spin)."

Her examinations yield new insight into breasts, aka the T of T&A, bosoms, knockers, the twins, a rack, jugs, melons, mounds, globes, orbs, bust.

Self-esteem was a hot topic when she spoke to eighth-graders at the Seattle Girls School recently. Squires focused on a primer of breast history and the importance of bra fittings.

Squires told the students how fashion trends helped shape the standards for breast beauty -- buxom bombshells ruled the '40s and '50s (Madonna brought back the bullet bras that used to point their way under women's sweaters), while the waifs took back the '60s (after flat-chested flappers reigned in the '20s).

Now, the ideal promoted online and within the pages of weekly magazines is the thin model with large breasts.

Models and actresses on television and in the movies present perfect and perky cleavage, the more rounded, the better. Other images -- such as porn, obviously -- also accentuate sexualized association with breasts. But other impressions come from more innocent origins.

She pulled out a Barbie.

If Barbie's body were to be translated into a real woman's body, she would have these dimensions: 39, 23, 33. Barbie's little in the middle, but she got much back -- and a lot of boob.

"The more a woman sees 'ideal images,' the more she feels worse about her own body," Squires said. "But every body is beautiful."

Bodies, she said, change a lot. And so do your breasts, with life-changing events such as pregnancy and birth, or through exercise.

"They're in a constant state of flux," Squires said. "Change is a good thing. If you don't like your breasts today, you may like them in 20 years."

Squires knows first-hand. She is a 34C. But she used to be a 34DD in high school, then a 36EEE with her first pregnancy. After nursing three children, she went down to the 34C, where she has stayed since.

"The gift I want to give to women is to be able to look out on that sea of breasts and say, 'This is amazing and mine are amazing,' " she said.

The girls at the school giggled and asked questions about whether sports bras caused breast cancer, about how to find the right size bra and about how she got to be The Boob Lady. There was also talk of boys.

Guys will appreciate your rack no matter what it looks like, Squires told them.

"Guys just care that they're breasts," she said. "Women overestimate the size men like. That's just not true. Men like proportion."

She gave the girls a brief background on the prominence of breasts in other cultures. Using dolls, Squires showed the girls goddesses whose womanly attributes were worshipped because they symbolized life-giving through nursing.

"In ancient societies, you didn't think about hiding your breasts. Women worked and nursed," she said.

Recently, a woman was thrown off a flight for nursing -- an action that in turn sparked a protest of nursing mothers at the same airport. Squires blogged about it and similar instances of people being offended by nursing moms and their images on magazine covers.

"One woman considered it a form of flashing, stating 'I don't want my son or husband to accidentally see a breast they didn't want to see.' Accidentally? In some cultures, women's breasts are purposely left uncovered at all times, making it easy for them to do the centuries-old job nature intended: feeding babies. What's unnatural are boobs deliberately hiked up by some tits-on-a-platter bra, á la Victoria's Secret," she wrote.

"In today's civilized society, women must stage 'nurse-ins' and lobby for laws to protect their right to breast-feed in public. But there's no legislation shielding our eyes from the endless images of provocatively posed models in their skivvies -- ready for work or play in a pair of indispensable stiletto heels."

A COMFY BRA?

On Monday, read a Life and Arts story on bra fitting.

MORE ONLINE

For more information about boobs from Elisabeth Squires: booksonboobs.com

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