

LAST STITCH

The Mad Hatter

By Shira Blumenthal



When I was in fourth grade, I was bullied by a girl in my class. She picked on me constantly about my hair, the way I looked, the way I dressed, my weight. I will never forget the pain this classmate caused me. I remember sprinting down the driveway into my house one day after school, where I ran into my mother's arms and sobbed. I could not understand why this girl chose to target me every day, all year long. This happened in the days before cell phones, Facebook and Instagram, so there was no social media involved, thankfully. Still, the hold this bullying had over me was powerful—so powerful that I switched to a new school at the start of fifth grade.

In my new school and beginning a new grade, it was almost as if that fourth-grade Shira stayed where I left her. I became a new person, made lots of friends and didn't look back. But twenty years later, I chose to look back. Last year, I created an anti-bullying campaign called Hat Not Hate (www.hatnothate.org). While my passion for preventing bullying is clearly personal, it is, unfortunately, a universal problem. About one in four kids in the United States is bullied. Recurring bullying can lead to depression, anxiety and suicidal behavior. And so the idea for Hat Not Hate was born. Lion Brand Yarn Company, where I've been serving as brand ambassador for the past five years, helped launch the Hat Not Hate initiative. The goal is to get knitters and crocheters to stitch blue hats—blue represents awareness and solidarity and is the color to wear in support of bullying prevention—and donate them to the cause. We would then give these hats to schools across the country for students to wear in October, National Bullying Prevention Month.

That first year, I was hoping to receive 1,500 hats by the end of September. In August, my father said, "I'll be impressed if you get 200." Unfortunately for him, he will never live this comment down. I like to say that the knitters and crocheters across the U.S. and around the world gave me one of the best thirtieth-birthday gifts ever: On September 28, I got a call from our chief marketing officer telling me we had received 2,600 hats. *Wow*, I thought. *We did it.*

It wasn't only hats that arrived. Notes came pouring in, too—handwritten letters from people who shared their personal stories with me, including tales they had never spoken aloud. They wrote their hearts out on these pieces of paper, and stitched their hearts into blue hats. Our Hat Not Hate office became a space where people felt safe to share their bullying hardships, and I became the holder of all these

stories, and all these wishes for a kinder world.

My father was so blown away with the response to Hat Not Hate that he learned to think twice before questioning my goals. In fact, as the CEO of Lion Brand, he empowered me to take on an even bigger goal for 2019. For our February launch, I upped the ante, asking knitters and crocheters for 25,000 hats by August 1. We had a wonderful response; people told us on our new Facebook page and Instagram account that they were looking forward to participating. But the real flow of mail didn't start until June, when the hats began coming in by the thousands. (In mid July I extended the deadline to September 1 so people who were just finding out about this campaign could participate.) Hats came from literally near and far, from Clifton, New Jersey, to Singapore, Japan and Australia. Crafters really let their creativity shine. Designs on the hats included cables, beads, patterns, colorwork, lace, sequins and more, all in various shades of blue (the only requirement). I sensed so much love and intention in every

package I opened. It was really touching. I think I kept tissue companies in business for the whole summer.

We received donations of more than 23,000 hats and nearly met our goal. My mission now, with the help of our partner organization Be Strong, is to distribute these hats to schools around the country, and for Hat Not Hate's message to reach every student who gets a hat. These hats were made by people who want all students to know that they are seen, they are accepted

for who they are, and we are all in this together.

In many of the notes I receive, people thank me for doing this. But if you watch any of the Mail Time videos that we posted on our YouTube Channel and on our social media, you know that I spend time thanking everyone else, as this campaign would not achieve success without our "blue soldiers." Each person who has contributed to this campaign has helped us bring awareness to the cause of bullying prevention. Even if you're not a knitter or crocheter, you can spread the message of Hat Not Hate. Post a picture of yourself wearing a blue hat, tag it with #hatnothate, and help get the word out worldwide: Stand up to bullying!

At a Social Media Week conference I attended last spring, Scott Harrison, the founder of Charity: Water, shared a quote that continues to inspire me: "Do not be afraid of work that has no end." And so I will continue to take on the work of preventing bullying.

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