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The tattooed nipples, looking so real

July 27, 2011 | By Elizabeth Wellington, Inquirer Fashion Writer

Her wholly round 36Cs exposed, Paula Johnson watches Rose Marie Beauchemin mix pigment - first a little brown, then a little pink.

Through the magic of permanent makeup, Beauchemin is about to tattoo nipples on Johnson's reconstructed breasts.

"It's all about creating the illusion of protrusion," Beauchemin said one recent Monday afternoon at her Mount Laurel office as she gradually shaded in Johnson's areola and nipple area.

After just three sessions, Johnson's nipples look like the work of Mother Nature rather than Beauchemin's deft use of an electronic magic marker.

"This was the last step for me," said Johnson, 55, a trace of relief in her voice. The grandmother from Cherry Hill endured a double mastectomy two years ago after she was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer. Johnson's mother died from the disease.

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Paula Johnson, 55, who underwent a double... (SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer)

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"Every day of my life, for so long, all I thought about was breast cancer. . . . I just wasn't ready until now" to get the tattoo. "Finally, I was like, 'Let's get this done,' " she said.

After reconstructive breast surgery, women have been known to go without nipples for years, explained Mandy Sauler, a West Chester-based tattoo artist who specializes in nipples.

That's because fighting breast cancer is a grueling process that often entails months or years of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. By the time entire breasts are removed, and nipples - which sometimes have malignant cells, too - go with them, getting a good facsimile is not always first on a woman's to-do list.

Doctors can build nipples onto new breasts as part of reconstructive surgery, but many patients are not satisfied with those add-ons because they lack natural gradual shading.

"Mine kind of fell off," said Jini Errichetti, 52, a school librarian and Cherry Hill mother of two, who was diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer in 2007 and had a single mastectomy. Nipples created through plastic surgery sometimes don't get sufficient blood supply, and the body rejects them. "I didn't even bother to go back in. I was left with this very light areola and you could hardly even notice it. ... "

Beauchemin completed her nipple tattoo last month.

Still, Errichetti is one of an increasing number of mastectomy patients demanding tattooed nipples, according to Sauler, who has started talks with the Abramson Cancer Center of the University of Pennsylvania Hospital to discuss fulfilling the demand.

