

94-year-old 'Rosie the Riveter' once made warplanes and red bandannas. Now she makes face masks with the same cloth.



Mae Krier makes face masks to help battle the coronavirus pandemic. (Courtesy Meg Krier)

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Mae Krier fondly reminisces about her favorite bandanna she wore while toiling away in the Boeing factory where she helped make B-17 and B-29 warplanes as a teenage girl during World War II.

Krier, now 94, often had to retie the burgundy knit bandanna when it slipped off her head during her shift at the Seattle factory. There, she and other young female workers wore the kerchiefs to protect their hair from getting caught in machines and yanked out of their scalps.

For many years, Krier has paid tribute to her beloved Rosie the Riveters by making red bandannas with white polka dots — a style shown in J. Howard Miller’s iconic Rosie the Riveter “We Can Do It!” poster for Westinghouse Electric. Since the war against the novel [coronavirus](#) started, Krier shifted her energy from making Rosie bandannas to Rosie face masks, cut from the same cotton cloth.

“These little pieces of red and white polka dots tell the story,” she said.

Krier, a great-great-grandmother, makes the masks as gifts for people who request them — including teachers, who said they will gladly wear the masks in the classroom and explain to students the history of their foremothers.

“That’s what I’m really looking for,” Krier said. “I want our legacy to stay alive. ... In a short while, we will be just a place in a history book.”

Rosie the Riveter

Krier, of Levittown, Pa., is a real-life Rosie the Riveter — one of about 5 million civilian women who served in the defense industry and elsewhere in the commercial sector during World War II, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. The women took the vacated jobs of men who joined the military and went abroad to fight.

“The women were every bit as good as the men,” Krier said. “Up until 1941, it was a man’s world, and they didn’t know how capable American women were. We sure showed them!”

She grew up in Dawson, N.D., and survived both the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The young men in her small town joined the military to fight in Europe and the Pacific when the war started, “and that just takes the heart out of the small town,” she said.



Mae Krier in 1944. (Courtesy Meg Krier)

So Krier, 17 at the time, and her sister, Lyola — who was 13 months older — and a friend named Kathy Kooker (now Dibley) decided to make a bold move and head to Seattle to work in the Boeing factory in May 1943. Lyola is gone now, but Dibley remains a good friend.

“It was an adventure,” Krier said.

She thought her job might just last for a summer, but she ended up staying at Boeing until 1945. She moved with her husband to Pennsylvania to be near his family, and she

returned to factory work briefly during the Korean War at Kaiser-Fleetwings. She met her husband — Norman, a Navy sailor who lived to be 93 — at a United Service Organizations dance in Seattle, and they married eight days after President Franklin D. Roosevelt died.

In the decades after the World War II era, Krier embarked on a mission to give her Rosie kin the honor for the contributions they made to the war effort. She lobbied federal lawmakers to get a National Rosie the Riveter Day, which began in 2018 on March 21, her birthday — but that date choice was just a remarkable coincidence, she said.

Now, Krier wants Rosie the Riveters to be honored with the Congressional Gold Medal. The House approved the measure, but the bill lacks enough support in the Senate. “When the war was over, men came home with flags, and Rosie came home with a red slip,” Krier said. “We never got any credit or recognition. I didn’t think that was fair.” She gives frequent speeches and has met public figures. For the 75th anniversary of D-Day last year, she sat with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) in Normandy, France. She met Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and cherishes the photo of the two of them he signed.



Mae Krier and Sen. John

McCain in 2017. (Mae Krier, from McCain's office)

When the coronavirus quarantine started in March, though, Krier had to withdraw from engagements and stay at home, so making masks became the perfect outlet for her passion. It keeps her “sharp and occupied,” she said.

A different war

Aside from promoting Rosie the Riveter’s heritage, Krier wants to help people fight the war against the virus the same way her generation fought the Nazis and Japanese: by everyone doing their part.

“We just dropped everything — men, women and children,” Krier recalled. “It was not my job or your job, it was our job. If I save one person’s life, it was worth every minute I spent making [masks].”

Krier said she is frustrated and disheartened to see how many Americans are fighting safety measures and refusing to wear masks. Nurses, she said, are the new Rosie the Riveters, and hospitals are the new battlefield with coronavirus patients.

“We’re fighting a different kind of war — a terrible virus,” she said. “Where is the ‘We can do it’ spirit?”

Krier — who remains nimble and spry, lives independently and still cuts her own grass — uses commercial sewing machines she has from her days as a crafter. She started making the masks informally a few months ago for family, friends and neighbors.

Someone posted about her masks on Facebook, and the [Honor Rosie Facebook page](#) — which has more than 1,000 fans — started getting numerous requests for her masks from all around the country.



Mae Krier visits the Pentagon

on Jan. 10.

Deb Woolson, who met Krier at a reenactment event and became a close friend, runs the Honor Rosie page and is processing mask requests. Krier said to Woolson, in Rosie fashion, “Now Deb, we can do it!”

And Woolson replied, “You’re right, we can do it!”

Woolson, of Phoenixville, Pa., has learned so much about Rosies and the World War II era from her friend.

“I hear different parts of the stories at different times,” Woolson, 65, said. “She just shared so much that she’s really taught all of us the meaning of patriotism and working together.”

Krier doesn’t charge for the masks, but she appreciates donations for postage. Many people have mailed her donations of both cash and materials, including cloth, elastic, thread and gift cards to craft stores.

“She’s a really special woman and we can learn a lot from her,” Woolson said. Sending people face masks is a personal project for her, as she lost a cousin and a sister-in-law to covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, and her brother is struggling to recover from it.

Krier — who has a son and daughter in their 70s, along with four grandchildren; eight great-grandchildren; and three great-great-grandchildren, one of which is named after

her — has made more than 300 masks, but she lost count. Woolson said Krier made two dozen masks one day earlier this month — and Krier has more than 600 orders on deck. “One thing that I’ve seen, answering all these requests, is that during this difficult time in our nation’s history, people are grateful to hear a positive story from a Rosie the Riveter, our dear Mae Krier,” Woolson said. “She has given Americans a reason to smile and have hope. The messages have been amazing, and Mae will read each one of them.”