

Prison Couture

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You just have to say "wow."

What else is there to say when first seeing the picture of the smiling young woman on Lion Brand Yarn's homepage? She looks like a free bird, blonde hair blowing in the wind, arms open in welcome. What's this independent woman advertising? Why, it's the "Coming Home" poncho.

You know the one -- the gray-and-white wrap Martha Stewart wore on her way from Alderson prison to her home in Bedford, N.Y. Crocheted by a fellow inmate and given to Stewart as a going-away gift, the poncho has run the cultural gamut from MSNBC to The Daily Show.

Knitting forums are lighting up with talk of the infamous poncho, which is also being referred to as the "Welcome Home," "Returning Home," or "Freedom" poncho depending on the site visited. A pattern is in demand.

According to lionbrand.com, "After receiving the largest number of requests ever for a single pattern, Lion Brand has created a new, free Homespun pattern to match the poncho that Martha Stewart wore upon her return home."

There it is again. Another compulsive and incredulous "wow" escapes from my lips.

"Lion Brand would like to recognize the woman who hand crocheted the now-famous poncho for Martha Stewart for her return

home. The New York Post reported that her name was Xiomaro Hernandez. We honor her creativity and the wonderful inspiration she has provided for everyone who is now encouraged to crochet. Lion Brand will make a donation of yarn and needles to the Alderson prison facility in honor of her work and her generosity."

Hmm. The props and the donation seem a nice gesture, but what The New York Post actually reported in their March 11 edition was that the woman who made the now-famous poncho is a 45-year-old convicted crack and cocaine dealer (and is probably one of the few women in prison who is allowed to own a crochet hook).

According to the publication, Hernandez "is serving a 235-month sentence with five years' supervision for conspiring to distribute cocaine and more than 50 grams of crack, according to the federal Bureau of Prisons."

Regardless of the veracity of the Post's reporting, the token mention of a woman of color convicted of selling drugs, especially when juxtaposed with an upper-class white woman's wardrobe, once again reinforces the often misplaced priorities of our nation.

Oh well, at least the poncho is pretty.

Though Martha did not single-handedly bring back the poncho upon her release from prison -- it's been back in style for awhile now -- what is it about her new wrap that has knitters and crochet connoisseurs alike flooding craft-related message boards and crashing Web-based yarn stores?

Could it be that as much as we might dislike Martha, sometimes we secretly want to be like her?

"I kind of want one," my friend Amy sheepishly admitted when I forwarded her the link to the "Coming Home" pattern.

I hate to admit it, but I kind of do too.

On a more serious note: For more information on the race, class, and gender issues at play for many women who go to prison for

selling drugs, please visit

www.drugpolicy.org/communities/race/womenofcolor.