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Stewart breaks out knit classic "Freedom poncho" unleashes flood of calls for pattern

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Martha Stewart emerged from prison a changed woman.

You could just tell.

The chic style maven - who attended her insider-trading trial last year swathed in luxe faux chinchilla and carrying a Hermes Birkin handbag - emerged from the Alderson Federal Prison Camp wearing jeans and a funky poncho crocheted from acrylic-blend yarn sold at Wal-Mart.

The greyish-green garment - dubbed the "Camp Cupcake Poncho" - almost immediately began to take on mythic qualities.

On her first day back at work at Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, the billionaire held up the poncho during a staff meeting and acknowledged its creator, an Alderson inmate who reportedly crochets 12 hours a day. Social commentators declared the doyenne of interior design reformed. A little softer. More of the people.

Out in the real world, online do-it-yourself message boards lit up with chatter about how to make the poncho. Frantic demands for the pattern flooded phone lines and e-mail boxes at Lion Brand Yarns, the New Jersey maker of a chunky yarn similar to that used to fashion the garment.

"The poncho does seem to have come to symbolize something. A poncho is not something you would think a diva would wear," said Ilana Rabinowitz, director of consumer marketing for Lion Brand. "It's very down-to-earth, and, somehow, that poncho spoke to people."

Lily Chin - officially the fastest crocheter in the world - said the storm around the winter poncho had everything to do with the fact that the woman who made



AP / Stephan Savoia

Style maven Martha Stewart, with her daughter Alexis, leaves prison with the "Camp Cupcake Poncho" made for her by an inmate.

homemaking cool again was wearing it. "The poncho trend has been with us for some time, but it had started to wane a little; she's infused it with new life."

The day she saw Stewart getting on her private plane cuddled in the scalloped-edged poncho, Chin, who lives in New York City, started working up a pattern for a very similar garment - long and swingy, with a small cowl neck.

Last weekend she crocheted the garment in cream and gray Coats & Clark yarns. Her free pattern for the "Freedom Poncho" will be published today on Loveland-based Interweave Press's website, www.interweave.com

"Interest in that poncho has grown exponentially. I've heard about it from my friends in the New York City Crochet Guild and over the Internet on all the mailing lists," Chin says. "I've seen good pictures of it, so I thought I should do a public service of some kind."

Chin, who has designed knitware for the runway collections of Isaac Mizrahi, Ralph Lauren, Vera Wang and Diane von Furstenberg, doesn't expect the poncho to dominate couture collections. "There has been a profusion of hand-crocheted ponchos on the market; all this means is that they'll continue production."

Lion Brand worked double time last week to get a pattern developed and also expected to post a free pattern at www.lionbrand.com this week. The company cultivates a massive online community of crafters who are quick to state their needs. "We know immediately when they want something, and boy did we hear about the poncho," Rabinowitz says.

Royal Yarns International developed a "Free Martha Poncho" kit for \$79.99 and will donate about \$4 worth of yarn to Alderson for every kit sold. The pattern is free; visit www.artsandcraftsstore.com/cfct/ctkit.htm.

Katherine Fedewa, a West Hollywood, Calif., knitting teacher who contributed three patterns to a poncho book that will hit shelves this fall, says she suspects seeing Stewart in a poncho will help the fad take root beyond the coasts. "I'm getting e-mails for all kinds of people asking if I have the pattern."

Fedewa says her pattern for a chunky, crochet poncho sells better than any other sold on her website, www.sweaterbabe.com

Grace Guidice, who purchased a delicate white poncho with a flossy fringe about six months ago at Ross Dress for Less says she sees the symbolism in Stewart's shawl.

"It made me think that she'd had time to reflect," the Littleton resident says. "When somebody goes to prison, it brings them down to earth."

Chin said wearing the BoHo-chic poncho may have helped Stewart exude more warmth than her polished pre-prison look did. "It was a very sharp move," she says. "She's no dope."