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My Hero

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Everyone needs a hero and I have mine.

My hero pioneered specialized treatment to normalize recovery for cancer patients. She created the first Appearance Center for patients at City of Hope Cancer Hospital in California. Then she consulted for and helped build twenty-three more Appearance Centers at major medical facilities across the country. At Harvard, St. Johns, Mount Sinai and Baylor, to name a few. She helped adults and children begin to lead normal, independent and healthy lives instead of hiding behind locked doors fearing rejection. At sixty, she contracted multiple sclerosis, but never gave up her passion. She continued traveling, consulting and educating patients wherever she could. When it became more difficult, she tried harder. When Yale University Medical Center decided to open an Appearance Center in their new cancer facility, they looked for the best in the field and hired her full time to run their center in New Haven. She moved across the country from California to Connecticut, into a little house facing Long Island Sound, hired a taxi to take her and her scooter to and from the hospital, and is still following her passion to bring normality to cancer patients. Recently, a photo was taken of her in the new center at Yale, surrounded by cartons of wigs, hats, make-up, books and bras to stock the shop. Her arms are outstretched, her head thrown back and her face filled with joy.

Linda Secher is her name. She is my sister-in-law and my hero.

When I met Linda over twenty years ago, she owned a beauty salon in Los Angeles, but her training was in microbiology. When she found that a number of her clients were disappearing while going through chemotherapy, she wondered what could be done to help them. They were embarrassed to be seen in public. Their hair was falling out, their complexions were sickly, they didn't know where to find special bras, or dental care and hadn't the vaguest idea of how to apply make-up to a face that had no eye brows or lashes. So they stopped coming to her shop and went into hiding. The last thing they needed was to have their hair done. Since there was no facility for special treatment and resources for them, she decided to make home visits to fill their special needs for wigs, prosthesis, insurance, dental and skin care, and all the other special services needed by recovering cancer patients. Linda made herself an expert in the field and then counseled patients and families, made special arrangements for wig fittings, got information packets and referrals for her clients from American Cancer Society's Look Good Feel Better Program, local hospitals and physicians.

Still, it did not satisfy her vision for the best care for recovering patients. They needed to get back into the world, not to be shut up in their homes fearful of going out in public and living normal lives. So she contacted a local cancer hospital, City of Hope, and presented her idea of having a special Appearance Center Boutique on hospital grounds. She would design, stock and run the shop and consult with clients. The caveat was that each client would be treated with sensitivity in private fitting rooms. Trained volunteers would help her run the shop to keep expenses down.

It was the first shop of its kind in the country—one of many

Linda Secher would create over the years. It was her passion, her joy and her vision that every cancer patient have access to Appearance Centers to re-enter life in the most normal way possible.

Ten years ago, Linda was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. At first it didn't slow her down, but as the years went by, her right leg wouldn't follow her commands, her hands trembled, and her eyesight deteriorated and she could no longer drive. Though she continued to work, traveling around the country became increasingly difficult, and some prospective clients doubted her ability. But not Yale. They fell in love with her enthusiasm and commitment and asked if she would consider moving to New Haven full time. She was ecstatic when she called to tell us the news. At seventy she was starting life all over again. I still choke up when I remember that phone call.

My own aging process makes me realize how important it is to be passionate about my purpose in life, to fill each day with joy and construct a legacy that is meaningful for younger generations. Linda Secher lives her passion heroically every day, overcomes challenges and never gives up. She is a living model of what it means to Age Gloriously.

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