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Wigs at root of her mission

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Armed with a trunk full of wigs and her experience as a cancer survivor, entrepreneur Sheril Cohen is on a mission.

She said losing her lustrous, waist-length black hair to chemotherapy in early 2001 tested every ounce of her courage. And shopping for a wig under harsh fluorescent lighting in a crowded shop made her eyes well and her stomach sink.

"I felt like I was trying on a bathing suit in a parking lot. All I wanted was a private room where I didn't have to share a stylist with four other people," Cohen said.

After a bone-marrow transplant in the summer of 2001 and a rocky climb into remission, Cohen realized she wanted to leave her position as a vice president of branding at J.P. Morgan and do something for other women diagnosed with cancer.

Girl on the Go is a wig business that lets customers choose from a large selection - human hair and synthetic - and 60 colors in the privacy of their homes.

The \$150 consultation includes custom-fitting and styling by licensed cosmetologists who've lived with cancer in their families.

"All my workers have to be compassionate. I didn't hire one applicant because his speech was too slang. I worried it might come off as harsh," Cohen said.



Smith for NEWS

Sheril Cohen's Girl on the Go allows cancer sufferers to choose wigs in their own homes.

To get her company off the ground, Cohen, now in her late 30s, needed \$10,000 worth of personal savings. Her first expense was a market survey of 50 local women living with cancer. She also appealed to friends for help, asking former marketing colleagues to help refine her plan.

The first idea eliminated was setting up the business as a nonprofit - too much red tape.

Later, Cohen dropped plans to launch Girl on the Go with services ranging from massage to color cosmetic makeovers.

"It was too overwhelming. I decided I had to narrow things down and focus on wigs. I can always expand later," she said.

With a basic blueprint, Cohen attended the International Hair Show at the Javits Center and picked up every business card she could find. She now sources her wigs from Korea and offers everything from a \$220 partial hairpiece to a \$1,200 top-of-the-line real-hair wig.

Last Fall, Cohen designed her first brochure, then asked two of her favorite doctors if she could leave copies in their waiting rooms. Four days later she got her first customer.

Today, Girl on the Go has four part-time employees, brochures in more than 60 oncology offices and 50 clients.

"It's so important for someone who has lost their hair to do this in private. I bought my first wig in a store, and it's just very traumatic when the wig comes off and people can see how little hair you have," said an early customer, Liz Timmer from Queens.

Timmer learned about Cohen's company after picking up a brochure in her doctor's waiting room. She had her appointment in her bedroom on March 1 and bought a \$300 wig that she plans to take with her on an upcoming cruise.

Cohen's plan calls for Girl on the Go to be profitable in 2005. But even if she makes just \$30,000 this year and \$60,000 next, Cohen won't give up.

But she is giving up her spacious \$2,300-per-month apartment on the upper West Side.

"I'm putting my stuff in storage and living off the kindness of others," she said.

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