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Company's wigs offer cosmetic, psychological boost to cancer patients

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Sheril Cohen was a vice president on Wall Street in October 2000. She had an apartment overlooking Central Park. She was 35, with long brunette hair, having fun with her friends.



Almost everything changed when her doctor told her she had stage IIIB cancer. She had felt lumps on her upper torso in the shower, but the pathology was not of lymphoma, she said; the site of origin was ultimately not known.

Her treatments lasted 13 months and forced her to leave work on disability. She had chemotherapy, surgery, more chemotherapy, a bone marrow transplant, radiation and immunotherapy.

After a bout with cancer caused her to lose her hair, Sheril Cohen tried to go back to her vice president of marketing job but decided to start her own business providing wigs for cancer patients.

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During the marrow transplant, she said, she prayed to die and then to live. She challenged herself. There had to be a reason to endure such pain.

A friend's mother told her there would be a silver lining. "I thought she was being trite." For the friend's mother, surviving cancer had made her realize that life is too short to be unhappily married. For Cohen, when she returned to work in April 2002, "something had shifted."

She said it didn't take much to redirect her energies.

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"I had been proud of the fact I was a VP in my 30s. I worked hard to get there," she said. Her position had been vice president of marketing at J.P. Morgan Chase. "But when I returned to work, it was shocking to me that I didn't care about it anymore. I was sitting in a meeting discussing market share, and I distinctly remember thinking, 'Ughhh!' I thought, 'I've been here before. I don't need to be here again.' "

A year ago, Cohen started a business, Girl on the Go, to provide wigs to women in the privacy of their homes. By then, she was eager to talk to cancer patients. Friends had sent friends and family to talk to her about their diagnoses, and nearly everyone was anxious about hair loss from chemotherapy.

"I thought I was the only person who didn't like to wig shop," she said. "I thought I was the one person who wanted privacy. Clearly it was not the case, judging from the dozen or so women who called me."

The company name is her personal encouragement: Go, get out there; live, she said. "Don't stay home thinking people will know you're wearing a wig. There's no stigma. You did nothing wrong to lose your hair."

It helps, she said, when a woman has a wig that looks good on her. "Wearing a bad wig is a public statement that you are sick," Cohen states on her Web site (www.girlonthego.biz).

She built a territory -- part of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Most of her 100 clients so far have come from in-home appointments, but 10 percent of the business is a recent mail-order service called Looks Just Like You. Women anywhere can send photos of themselves wearing the hair they want replicated. Cohen's wig maker, Pittsburgh native Jamie Stewart, makes wigs to order.

Stewart grew up in Manchester on the North Side. She started doing hair as a girl and has been a hair and wig stylist in New York City for 23 years. Cohen's ad for a wig stylist in The Village Voice two years ago caught her eye, and she and Cohen have been making house calls ever since.

It is a job she does in addition to working at a hair salon.

"It has been a phenomenal experience," said Stewart, whose own sister had cancer. "I have 12 demo wigs I take to people and a color swath. The people we see, the first time, still have their hair. The next time, their hair may be gone."

Synthetic-hair wigs are made to fit over a cap that stretches to fit any head. They range from \$350-\$500. Human-hair wigs have to be fitted by measuring the head. The cost of these starts at \$1,000 and can be as high as \$3,000, said Cohen. It depends on length, if the color the client wants

is natural or man-made and whether there are highlights.

To start her company, Cohen gave up her big apartment and moved into a little one in a less tony neighborhood. She gave up expensive habits, too. She plugged the savings into Girl on the Go, saying, "This is all I'm doing, and I plan on this being all I do for a very long time." She hopes to pay herself a salary by 2006.

"People say, 'Don't you get depressed talking to women who have been diagnosed with cancer?' But it's the complete other side of it. It is so rewarding. I feel like I've helped contribute something."

She said portions of what she puts on her corporate credit card go to St. Jude's for cancer research. She also hopes someday to make significant contributions from her business to the Cancer Research Treatment Fund, a not-for-profit agency that raises money for clinical trials of treatments for a wide variety of cancers (www.crt.org).

Early in her own treatments, she said, friends tried to push people on her for heart-to-hearts -- strangers whose cancers were different from hers. This rankled her, she said, but now, "I want to be a cancer advocate.

"I want to devote my life to this. You really need to be happy in this life because it goes."

To reach Girl on the Go by phone, call 1-800-355-6976.

(Diana Nelson Jones can be reached at djones@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1626.)

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