

FROM BARE TO HAIR

Hair Loss Solutions for Girls, Teens and Women

By Peggy Knight, founder and president of Peggy Knight Solutions™

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I dedicate this book to my oldest and dearest friend Kathy Hale. Kathy held me up when I was down and reveled in my successes. She was the inspiration behind the charity "Locks of Love," which we co-founded. She is and has always been my support system.

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CHAPTER ONE

GOING, GOING, GONE

I had been trying to cover up hair loss for fifteen years when I discovered that I didn't have to put up with hiding under wraps or bad wigs that threatened to expose my bald head at any moment. At the age of thirty, I found out about a revolutionary hair replacement solution—at that point available exclusively in Europe—that used suction instead of tape or elastic to secure hairpieces to one's head. A quick trip confirmed my every hope. It actually worked.

For years I had been creating my own wigs that actually looked natural. Now, finally, I had a foolproof way to keep them on my head. That's when I realized that I'd found my calling. I had to share the answer to hair loss with the millions of American girls, teens and women who still suffered the way I had. I could improve their lives just as instantly and profoundly as I had improved my own. And with a natural head of hair that didn't threaten to pop off or make their heads ache, they could once again feel as normal as I now did.

I'd traveled a long, tough road to get to that place in my life. I learned about hair loss at the age when other girls were exploring hair styles. I was just fourteen when Alopecia Areata grabbed hold of my life, squeezed it, twisted it and spit it out, leaving me to find my own way.

Losing one's hair is never easy, a fact that thirty million American women know all too well. But it's devastating when you're a youngster who's enthralled with hair. As a girl and then a young teen, my dark, curly hair—a byproduct of my Italian heritage—was not only my pride and joy, it was my obsession. At age ten I made what could very well have been the world's very first highlight by creating a tiny fall out of silvery thread, attaching it to a bobby pin and then blending it in with my own hair.

During the next few years, my girlfriends and I would spend hours in front of the mirror experimenting with new 'dos. My dad would pound on the bathroom door saying, "*Hurry up girls, you've been in there for hours.*" He was right, but after all, we were fussing over our hair. That was what girls did. Great hair made us feel, well, great. Conversely, of course, bad hair days made us feel terrible ... and not just about our hair.

I remember vividly the day my mother gave me a home permanent wave right before my First Holy Communion. She meant well, but she provided me with the perm from hell! Nothing could calm down the frizz, and I was sure that my life was ruined forever.

As all of my girlfriends were leaving home in their white dresses and veils the following morning, I curled up on my bed and sobbed. I hated my hair and wanted to hide away forever. Instead, my parents sent me off to church to face the humiliation. I feel quite certain that I burned all of the photos of that holy day. As I look back on a hair-related incident that once seemed to be the end of the world, I realize that the perm was a subtle preparation for what lay ahead. The day would come when I would long for those frizzy locks I once hated.

The Day of Discovery

As I brushed my hair in preparation for my fourteenth birthday party, I felt a smooth patch on the side of my head. Where was the hair that was supposed to be there? In a panic, I ran into the living room to show my parents.

“What happened? What happened?” I cried. “Look at my hair!”

The round bald spot was the size of a quarter. I didn’t know what had caused it, but I knew something was very wrong. I sat down and cried. Despite their alarm, my parents decided to give my hair time to re-grow before rushing me off the doctor. That seemed like a good call because in a short period of time fuzz replaced the smooth surface. All was forgotten until a second spot appeared on the other side of my head. And then another and another. The spots seemed to have a life of their own. As one began sprouting new hair and filling in, the other grew larger and balder.

Thus began a cruel yo-yo process of having my hair grow and fall and grow and fall. It would have been easier if my hair had all fallen out immediately. If it was going to come out, let it come out. If it was going to grow, let it grow. But no, every day was a different story. Eventually, the spots started to appear more and more frequently. So instead of one spot on the side of my head, there would be two that would grow to the point where they merged together to form a figure-eight.

Eventually, it became clear that my hair was falling out faster than it was growing in. By the age of twenty-four, I was completely bald.

A Family Affair

Ironically, shortly after I had lost my first patch of hair, my petite, beautiful mother developed a bald spot of her own, which simply grew larger as others developed. Within six months she had lost all of her waist-long hair, along with all the rest of the hair on her body. Questions began to race through my mind: *Is this what I have to look forward*

to? What could have caused this hair loss? Do I have a strange disease that I share with my mother? Is our nutrition lacking, or are we using the wrong shampoo?

I would later discover that there are many medical conditions—ranging from disease and stress to genetics and aging—that cause hair loss. Scar tissue from burns, trauma to the scalp from excessive hair pulling (whether from a tight pony tail or compulsive behavior), chemotherapy and radiation, malnutrition (whether chronic or caused by a crash diet), hormone imbalances, and even the environment can trigger hair loss. Some of these conditions, like stress, cause only temporary hair loss. In other cases, the loss is permanent. Diagnostic tests, which I'll discuss in Chapter Four when I provide more detailed information about hair loss causes and treatments, may help you zero in on abnormalities contributing to hair thinning. In my case, I didn't have to look past my mother to ascertain that genetics had something to do with my condition, which would eventually be diagnosed as Alopecia Areata.

The Great Cover Up

As a teenager with hair loss, my primary concern quickly became hiding my increasingly bare head from the rest of the world. I learned some tricks from others. On the day we were scheduled to take school photos, I had no idea how to cover up the four-inch diameter bald spot on the top of my head along with the others that had cropped up. I took mental notes as our local hair stylist somehow managed to create something out of nothing. Before long all of the spots had been camouflaged and I was ready for my close up. The artfully created look might have been unusual, but at least I didn't look hairless.

The difficult task of cosmetically concealing my growing baldness by teasing my remaining hair and using hairspray to hold the style in place took longer and longer as I had less and less hair to work with. The night of my senior prom, I was supposed to be picked up at 6:30 pm for dinner, but as afternoon turned to evening, my hairstyle was still a work in progress. This time I was forced to add in a hairpiece, which I attached to my remaining hair with dozens of bobby. The fake hair blended with my own, but my entire head was so heavily doused with hairspray that it had a lacquered finish. With just thirty minutes left on the clock, I finally completed my up-do (and I use the word literally) and had just enough time to slip on my dress and make up my face. At the prom, I had to walk—and dance—like I had a book on my head because, with the slightest tip, the entire coif tilted. But I had made it! That wouldn't always be the case.

As my hair loss progressed, eyebrow pencil and then scalp crayons and hair additions were incorporated into my routine. I longed for the days when I could get up, wash my

hair and run out the door. What used to take five minutes unless I was fooling around with hair styles now routinely took about an hour from start to finish, with much of that time spent in frustration and tears.

Eventually things finally got to the point where my hair was so thin I couldn't cover the bald spots with hair. By high school I had already started wearing scarves to cover the missing patches of hair, and they became my trademark. Each scarf matched the outfit of the day because my mother or I made most of my clothes by hand. Unfortunately, the school had a dress code that prohibited head coverings. The principal and most of the teachers knew about my situation, so my scarves were approved. On one occasion, however, I was confronted by a substitute teacher who ordered me to remove my scarf in front of the entire class. Profoundly humiliated, I bolted out of the classroom and headed home. That afternoon, my parents visited the school and the teacher apologized to me the next day. The gesture, however well-intentioned, could not erase the pain and embarrassment that had been inflicted.

Scarves quickly became a mainstay of my wardrobe at home and on the road. I had one in every color and material. They were stashed in my purse, glove compartment, next to the bed, in my gym bag and in my suitcase. I never knew when a big wind might blow, leaving me bareheaded.

Hats were also a good cover up for bald spots and they prevented the wind from totally devastating a hairstyle that took me hours to create. So I made sure to have one for every occasion—casual hats, sports hats and dress hats—in all colors, styles and fabrics. My style efforts, however, did nothing to stem the lack of self-esteem caused by my hair loss.

Lots and Locks of Love

By then making it from day to day was an emotional balancing act. Despite a condition that had upended my life and self-confidence, I did not receive much family support or nurturing as a child, so I had to go outside my family network to find solace. When my hair began to fall out, my best friend Kathy was (and still is to this day) the most supportive influence in my life. She always stuck up for me and even got into a fist fight with one of the boys who found every possible opportunity to call me “baldy.” And when my parents refused to acknowledge my need for a wig, Kathy helped me fund—and find—my first wig, an adventure I'll chronicle in the next chapter.

Kathy's help didn't stop there. One day about twenty years ago, she announced that she was growing her hair so that I could create a custom wig for myself. I didn't quite grasp the concept at the time, but over the months as her hair got longer and longer, the

act of love she was offering became increasingly apparent. When her hair finally got so long that it was driving her crazy, she announced that it was time to chop it off. We scheduled a styling appointment, and had a photographer on hand to record the hair cutting.

Little did we know that this would prove to be the first of many such events. That act of generosity prompted Kathy and me to found Locks of Love, a charity that has since provided natural hairpieces to thousands of financially disadvantaged children all over the world suffering from long-term hair loss.

Self-esteem is vital to all of us, but it's critical to kids and young adults. Over the years I've watched faces change when I put hairpieces on heads. Those kids not only brighten up, they stand up! Young women who feel bad about themselves have the worst posture in the world. When they first come in to see me, their shoulders are rounded and they look at the floor instead of up at me. But after I put a fabulous head of hair on their head, they walk out tall and bouncing, their hair flying.

I saw that again and again with Locks of Love during the ten years that Kathy and I gave away hairpieces to children before filing for nonprofit status, and in the years after when the organization garnered world fame. Thanks to media attention, children who were unable to afford natural hair wigs began sending in applications by the hundreds, and girls from all over the world began sending us the ponytails they'd purposefully grown. Soon we outgrew our offices and had to schedule volunteers to handle the volume of phone calls and e-mails we received.

Reading the letters from the children who lovingly cut and donated their hair proved the most rewarding part of the Locks of Love program. Some came from girls as young as three. They wrote in crayon and drew pictures of little girls with bald heads. These letters often brought tears to our eyes.

Although I am no longer actively involved in the operations of Locks of Love, my company continues to receive donations of hair, which we turn into wigs for children in need. And Kathy continues to remind me of how the idea for the charity arose. As I ran my hands through her hair one day, I said, "I wish I had your hair." She said, "You can."

I am proud of my best friend Kathy Hale for being the inspiration behind Locks of Love and thankful for the good work of the volunteers and the children all over the country who selflessly cut their hair to benefit others in need. Most of all, I am thrilled for the young children who receive these wigs. (For more information about Locks of Love visit www.locksoflove.org.)

Of course, I'm equally proud of the work I've done through Peggy Knight Solutions™ to help young girls, teens and women of all ages to live happy, normal lives despite the loss of their hair. For more information about Peggy Knight Solutions™ take time to peruse the www.peggyknight.com site or just contact us. You can reach us by phone at (800) 997-7753, by fax at (415) 289-1777 or by email at customerservice@peggyknight.com .

And stay tuned for Chapter Two ... coming soon.