



BIG BITES

Her Journey Began With A Single Step

RETIRED NURSE FINDS COMFORT, CAREER IN SOLES BY JIM EVANS

AS A VOLUNTEER NURSE IN RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA, Linda Telge had to walk everywhere. Since Saudi law forbade women to drive, Telge was forced to walk the desert with other expatriate nurses trying to avoid the *mutaween* (religious police.) The daily grind took its toll on her spirit...and her feet.

“Nurses at that time were wearing Reeboks, Asics Gels and similar athletic footwear as work shoes to keep their feet from hurting,” she explains. Yet despite her efforts, she (and other nurses like her) began suffering from severe plantar fasciitis—an inflammation of a band of fibrous tissue on the bottom of the foot which causes painful heel spurs. Little did Telge know that her stint in Saudi Arabia, and her subsequent condition, would lead to a major transition in her career.

Linda Telge, 51, grew up in Baldwin (Long Island), New York, where she was inspired early on to become a nurse by an aunt who was a nurse in Germany. After earning her diploma from Bethel Israel School in NYC and graduating with her BSN from Arizona State University in Tempe, she began a long and successful 27-year career as a neurosurgical operating room nurse working at Sharp Memorial Hospital, Cabrillo Hospital, Alvarado Medical Center, Naval Medical Center San Diego, Paradise Valley Hospital and outpatient clinics throughout Southern California.

But the continuing stress of standing on her feet all day in the operating room since her time in Saudi Arabia had become unbearable. Every morning when she awoke, Telge experienced increasing pain from her plantar fasciitis. Cortisone injections, icing, taping, orthotics and massive doses of Ibuprofen provided only temporary relief. To add insult to injury, Telge was experiencing classic nurse burnout—a syndrome leading to one in five of the country’s 2 million nurses changing jobs or quitting the profession altogether. The short-staffing, long hours and stress were catching up to her.

In August 2003, while working at the Naval Medical Center, a friend introduced Telge to Z-Coils—strange-looking shoes with large springs affixed to the soles that were said to alleviate foot pain. Touted by several well-known celebrities including Shirley Maclaine, Dustin Hoffman and Ellen Burstyn, Telge decided to give the Z-Coils a try. After wearing the shoes for one month, Telge was completely pain free! She encouraged some of her co-workers at the hospital to try the shoes too, and they all experienced similar results.

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It was then that Telge became inspired to take her “big bite”: Resign from nursing and open a Z-Coil shoe store.

“It was scary in the beginning,” Telge admits, “but I felt that the negative energy at the hospital wasn’t healthy for me anymore and it just wasn’t worth sitting back and not having a more adventurous life. The choice of staying in an un-nurturing career was no longer an option.”

While most of Telge’s family was supportive of her decision to go into business for herself, some of her friends “thought I was nuts,” she says. In fact, one of the doctors where she worked told her, “You’ll be back because those things [the Z-Coils] will never work.”

Telge was determined to prove her friends and other naysayers wrong...despite her lack of real business experience outside of the hospital. After a rocky start, Telge hired an accountant, sold her house to finance her inventory and opened The Smiley Feet Shoe Store in La Mesa in January 2004.




Linda Telge at The Smiley Feet Store.

“There have been challenges along the way,” she says, “but the manufacturer offered a three-day training course which offered some basic ideas about opening a business, and I had help from my accountant learning the software for handling inventory and bookkeeping.” And although Telge was no longer able to rely on a steady paycheck, her lifestyle as a nurse had put her in a favorable financial position. “I was fortunate that I didn’t have much in the way of personal bills and saved enough from my nursing career to help me get started.”

Telge adheres to the conventional business philosophy that “the customer is always right,” but admits some customers can be difficult. “Still,” she chuckles, “even the most difficult customers are not as unpleasant as some of the doctors I worked with!”

Her advice to other would-be entrepreneurs? “I would definitely recommend opening your own business to anyone,” she says, “but especially to women because many of us are just now beginning to believe that we can do it. Most people thought I was crazy to open my store and thought the shoes were too funny looking and just a fad. But I have succeeded in spite of them because I believe in the product and, more importantly, I believe in myself. For the first time, I am able to give the kind of quality care and attention to my customers that I would have liked to have given my patients, but was never given the time.” UTS



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