

## It's not the typical rags-to-riches story. In fact, it is the opposite. It's a story of new beginnings.

"I suppose in the world's eyes, it looks like my life is a sorry mess now," she said, "and it's anything but that."

Certainly Linda has not lost her beauty queen smile, a genuinely happy grin. Carefully coiffed brown hair frames her oval face. The face is thinner at 42, but it retains the high round cheeks of youth. Her blue-gray eyes hit at her wry sense of humor.

The ever-present red wheelchair gives evidence of her disability. And there is a slight tremor in her voice when she talks.

But it is Linda Strasheim's spirit that commands attention.

Sharon Frey knows about that spirit. A close friend, she described Linda as an "other-directed" person, a person who draws people to her and makes them feel comfortable.

Randall Bretz, the director of media productions at Linda's church, knows that spirit, too.

"She has amazed me at her outlook on life," Bretz said. "She's a very caring individual."

And Linda is a woman who pushes the limits of her disability, Mrs. Frey said.

"She's a person who sets goals and is not satisfied to remain with the status quo," Mrs. Frey said. "She really is a person who says, 'OK, Lord, here I am.' Every week she calls me with something new."

Mrs. Frey recalls the day Linda invited her over for an exercise session.

"I thought that would last about five or 10 minutes," Mrs. Frey said. But 30 minutes later, it was Mrs. Frey who was huffing and puffing while Linda urged her to keep up and do "just 10 more."

Developing a positive perspective on life has been a long, hard pull for Linda. She wrote of the struggle in "Something Beautiful," an autobiography published last spring by Zondervan Publishing House.

In the book, Linda sketches a childhood spent happily tagging along with her father and trying to climb the biggest trees. As she grew older, she turned her drive to other things. Being a social success, becoming a Miss Kansas.

And she wrote of the first troubling symptoms of an unknown problem. A problem that wouldn't go away. When it became too hard to keep her job, she escaped into marriage. Bug she found no relief.

Instead, her sleepy hours got longer. She lost more control over her muscles and often she couldn't keep down her dinner. Finally her husband and her mother convinced her to see a doctor. Two doctors and a psychiatrist later, Linda's problem was labeled "hysterical paralysis."

The psychiatrist recommended immediate placement in the state mental hospital. In desperation, she agreed. She agreed, too, when the psychiatrist said a divorce might help her mental state and let her walk again.

But she remained bedfast.

Finally, additional tests yielded a new diagnosis — multiple sclerosis. Linda sat on her bed after hearing the diagnosis, encircled by information pamphlets on MS.

"I thought someone forgot to give me the pamphlet that tells me the cure," she said.

The struggle really began when Linda left the hospital to face life with a disability.

She wanted to commit suicide, she wrote. She decided to drown herself in the bathtub because she couldn't hold a razor straight enough to cut her wrist. But every time she tried, her mother or three sisters thwarted her plans by popping in the bathroom to chat.

Her father, on the other hand, could never quite come to terms with a favorite daughter in a wheelchair. Linda wrote of his unexplained silences with her, his disappearances. Later she realized her parents had been having marital problems for many years. Back then she thought she was the problem.

Her chance to escape finally came with an invitation from relatives in California. There, during an extended stay, the determination that had pushed her into Miss Kansas pageant finally reasserted itself. She took a couple of college classes and she met new friends.

**A**nd she found her faith . . . at a Billy Graham crusade.

She began speaking to various groups for the National MS Society. Soon she was invited to represent the society in a meeting with then-First Lady Pat Nixon. Before and after photos of her were used in the society's poster campaign.

When financial problems ended her stay in California, Linda went home, but was determined not to stay there. She enrolled in Emporia State Teachers College in Kansas. At that time, Emporia was one of few colleges designed for people in wheelchairs.

It was at Emporia that Del Strasheim found Linda. Then a 31-year-old architect from Lincoln, Del was no stranger to disability. He had a partial hearing loss from a childhood bout with measles.

Several years earlier, Strasheim had clipped a Parade magazine article about Linda. The article, a before-and-after look at former beauty queens, was written while she was in the national MS poster campaign. Something about the woman the article described as "spunky" sparked his interest. Two more articles about Linda in different magazines caught his eye in the next three years.

Now, something prompted Strasheim to drive the 250 miles to Emporia to meet her. It took three trips before he was successful, but he was not disappointed.

They were married in May 1976.

During their courtship, Strasheim had suggested the autobiography, Linda said. From that first idea to the final publication took 10 years of work. She went through

two co-authors in the process. And she relived a lot of "I sat there at that typewriter just crying," she said, "and the whole time thinking I was going to rust out my keys. It was marvelous cleansing for me, but I wouldn't want to go through it again."

Her tears had one positive result, however. She became closer to her father after he read the book. At first, he told her, he wasn't sure if he was the hero or the bum of the story. But hearing her story has softened him, Linda said.

And Linda has learned to let go of the past. Her husband helped her take the first step. They threw her scrapbooks in the dumpster and gave away her trunkful of evening gowns in a symbolic burial of by-gone days. Today, instead of thinking about what might have been, she said, she has adopted a more positive perspective.

But the struggle is not over. Just the daily activities of living take most of her limited energy, she said.

A normal day begins at 8 a.m. She exercises along with a TV exercise show, using the set as both physical and moral support. Then there's breakfast that her husband leaves for her.

"That's one way he supports me," she said, "because he knows that on cold mornings putting a breakfast together would take a lot of energy."

Before starting lunch, she has time for a few small tasks. As a disabled housewife, every household job takes longer, she said. Her husband has lowered the counters, sink and stove in the kitchen so she can work easily from her wheelchair.

After lunch, she sends out greeting cards to friends or others who need a cherry word or she does crafts or works around the house. In late-afternoon she takes a nap before starting supper.

Later, she and her husband work on their prayer list, praying for people in the church who request special thoughts. They watch the weather on the all-weather cable television channel. And then at 9 p.m. they head for bed.

"I know my life sounds maybe a little bit dreary," Linda said, "but it's not to me, it's beautiful. Just living is fun."

Some days the living is more fun than others, though. Some days she doesn't even have the energy to write. A bout with flu this fall kept her in bed for three weeks. And on days like those, Linda said, she still fights the feelings of discouragement.

"Sometimes I think if I have one more gray, cloudy, cold, lonesome day, I'll tear my hair out," she said. "That's when I really have to pray for strength to get through it."

**L**inda credits her faith for giving her the strength to deal with her disability. Mrs. Frey says Linda's own determination is amazing. Linda, Mrs. Frey said, has been able to turn her struggle into opportunities. Over the last few years, Linda has spoken

to several women's groups and Christian groups in Lincoln and nearby towns. Since her book came out, she has been on Christian radio talk shows in such places as Kansas City and Denver. A videotaped interview with her has been distributed to Christian TV stations around the nation. This fall she will be the main speaker at a regional seminar on ministering to the disabled.

Even when at home, she reaches out to others. She has developed a "ministry of encouragement" with her greeting cards and she has the daily prayer list. She grows African violets to be given to people who are hospitalized or confined at home. Recently she taught a series of Bible study classes on "How to be a Godly Wife."

**S**ometimes the price of her efforts is a day or more in bed. But Mrs. Frey said that Linda often chooses to pay the penalty in order to get things done.

"She really does a lot and then she has to recuperate and she does something and has to recuperate," Mrs. Frey said. "It's difficult, but again it would be easy for someone to just give up and she doesn't. She's accomplished more than the average person because she's that way."

Linda's attitude, plus careful attention to her diet, exercise and rest, have made her physically stronger than in her days in the state hospital. And her doctor agrees that her attitude is keeping the MS under control.

Characteristically, MS is a progressive disease. Patients are expected to die younger than normal.

The future is scary, Linda admitted. An uncharacteristic quiet overtakes her.

Then she laughs again. Her husband's hearing loss is progressive, too, she said, so at least they're going downhill together.

"You see why I keep talking, keep repeating about my trust in the Lord. I have to, that's all I've got."

"The future could be very, very frightening if I let it . . . but I won't let myself, because I could have myself in tears in five minutes if I thought too hard about things."

"I won't do it."

**"I thought someone forgot to give me the pamphlet that tells me the cure."**