

Alopecia & Real Life
by Jeanine McTasney & C. Carter

Christine Carter, originally from New Jersey, now lives and works in New Mexico. She owns and operates a graphic design company specializing in newspaper production. She lives with her husband of 30 years, her 23 year old son, two small cats, and one giant dog. She hopes to move to the pacific northwest to be near the ocean again. This picture was taken just prior to the onset of alopecia. There have been no pictures taken since.



Just before Christmas in 2011, I received a most unwelcome “gift.” I was about to turn 50, and had experienced very good health all my life. Suddenly, huge amounts of hair began falling out. After a few days it was obvious something was very wrong. I scheduled an appointment with my doctor, and was told that I had alopecia.

I had heard of alopecia – but really never considered it was something that would happen to me. At my age, I would have sooner expected to have a heart attack than something as odd and devastating as this. My whole family has always had thick heads of hair. Up until that point, so had I. My hair was long and I often just let it do what it wanted to do. But in grasping for possible causes for this – I made an emergency appointment with my hair stylist to have it cut, irrationally thinking that perhaps its weight might be a problem. My hair stylist was horrified at the amount coming out, remarking that she had only seen hair fall out like this when customers were going through chemotherapy.

I can only describe my feelings at this time as panic and total devastation. For someone with not the greatest self esteem to begin with, this was a cruel twist of fate. I was not getting any answers from the medical community either. It was shocking to see just how little doctors knew about this condition, and even more shocking to find out that there was not much they could do. Helplessly, I realized that I would soon be bald. One of the most devastating moments of my life was standing in front of the mirror, and shaving off the last few straggly hairs I had left. I could not look at myself in the mirror and still, nearly two years later have a hard time with my reflection. I avoid it as much as possible.

I found that there are a great variety of wigs available. I purchased several, and they make it possible for someone like myself to go out into the world without feeling too awkward. One problem, however, remained. I have what is known as alopecia universalis. Which means that in addition to the hair on my head, I lost all the rest of the hair on my body as well.

As an artist, I know just how much eyebrows and eyelashes define the face. Just changing the shape or arch of the eyebrow can make a face change mood, character, even personality. Without eyebrows and lashes, the face looks completely dead, emotionless, and frankly, even frightening. Alopecians often refer to themselves as aliens. I have certainly said this myself. Each morning, without looking in the mirror, I would wash my face, dry it, and before even getting coffee begin the process of drawing in my facial features. During the day, even with top quality water-proof products, these faux features would smudge and fade, and gradually return my face to its strangeness. Each day with a new application of eyebrows, the shape and weight would be slightly different, and each day, I looked like a different person.

It was after several months of this routine that I began to look into permanent makeup. I visited with a few different people who offered this service. Most were estheticians in salons without any special training. It was very frightening to imagine that whatever they tattooed on my face, I would be stuck with. I saw some very horrible and unnatural results. Clearly many clinicians had no understanding of how to make a natural looking brow. Most I saw looked like thick, fat marker strokes – if strokes were even attempted. The rest looked fake – solid, perfectly matched arches which gave no consideration to the shape of the face, or the fact that each side of the face is different. It was one size fits all. At this point, eyeliner was not even on my radar. I kept researching however, learning about the process, and viewing pictures online. I was prepared to travel far away to work with a professional who was skilled with working on patients with alopecia. These skilled professionals seem to be few and far between.

However I finally found a woman in my area that I was comfortable working with. Her expertise, education and her compassion went far and above those that I had met with before. I was both moved and amazed by her skill at medical re-pigmentation as well as her ability to create amazingly realistic results with eyebrow and eyeliner enhancement and recreation. She had a large amount of work she was able to show me, and the results were wonderful. She made me feel comfortable and I trusted her. We spent at least an hour drawing in the shape of my eyebrows until they looked right. The process took two visits, first for the base coat, and then another for adding strokes to simulate the hairs. I was thrilled with the results. When I came back for the second visit, I felt safe enough to have the permanent eyeliner done as well. The most important part of this process was the trust I had in her, and her desire to help me. I knew that her training enabled her to give me the realistic look that I needed to have.

I have had my eyebrows and liner for a few months now. When I get up in the morning now, I look like a human being. Most days I don't bother with makeup at all – which is a return to normalcy for me. I no longer sleep with my door shut in fear of having someone in my house “see me like that.” Having this condition is a nightmare, but the expert and professional care, and the results I received have made it much better. I can almost look in the mirror now.