

The Story of LiftVest
By Cynthia Cohen

I invented the the LiftVest for my mother.

After she retired in 1970, my mother came to live with me and my husband and our two boys. Her presence in our home made it possible for me to have the freedom to continue my education, which I had neglected. during the years that I had been an actress. By the early 1980s, I had completed college and law school, taught at the City College of New York, started my Ph. D. and was embarking on a career in international child rights law an interest, which had its roots in the volunteer work I had done with a New York City street gang in the early 1960s. Because our sons were getting older, and I was traveling internationally, Mother was often alone for extended periods of time.

As her physical capacity began to weaken, making her vulnerable to falls, we had to consider some other type of living situation. We made arrangements for Mother to move to a charming New England senior residence near our cabin in the Berkshires. I saw her every weekend and planned special trips for just the two of us and her wheelchair. I took her with me to a child rights meeting in Geneva and managed a side trip to fulfill her life long dream of seeing Paris. Over the years, we went to Bermuda many times - taking mother's wheelchair along as part of our luggage.

In 1990, when Mother was eighty-eight, I decided that we should take a "fly and drive" trip around Northern Europe. Since I could not handle Mother alone, I asked a high school classmate who had been one of Mother's voice students, to come with us and help me. Mother had always wanted to see the tulips in Holland, the Rhine River, the Black Forest, Salzburg, Vienna, Budapest, Prague and Berlin. We rented a car, strapped her wheelchair on top and managed to do it all -- driving over 5000 km and visiting eight countries in fourteen days, and stopping to see some of my professional colleagues along the way! We had a wonderful time, even though getting her into and out of the car was always a challenge. We looked at tulips and windmills in Holland, stayed in Goethe's hotel room in Innsbruck, had Sacher Torte in Vienna, listened to gypsy music at a restaurant in Budapest, managed to get a hotel room in Bratislava

only because we had an American Express card, and got to Berlin just as the Wall was beginning to come down. As we traveled we kept a scrapbook of Polaroid photos which we took every day to help Mother keep track of her whirlwind trip. She loved every minute of it! I did too.

Eventually, Mother's physical condition deteriorated to the point where it was necessary for her to have continuous care. Because she had been born in Indian Territory (before Oklahoma was a state) and had grown up in Muskogee, Mother longed to return to Oklahoma. This led me to arrange for her to go back "home" to a continuing care facility in Muskogee. For the last seven years of her life, once a month I would commute from New York City to Oklahoma and spend a week with her. I also arranged to teach a summer course in international child rights law at the University of Tulsa College of Law in order to have more time with Mother.



CYNTHIA, HER MOTHER, AND A COLLEAGUE IN VIENNA

During our precious days together we would take trips to Tulsa to visit museums and attend concerts. We also went on short day trips to other places in Northeastern Oklahoma and Western Arkansas. We even attended a Homecoming event at Oklahoma Baptist University, her alma mater, which my grandfather had helped to establish. She was especially happy to be with me when I was admitted to the Bar of the State of Oklahoma in a special swearing in ceremony in the Supreme Court chambers of the Oklahoma State Capitol.



Whenever I was in Muskogee, we were always going places. We went out to restaurants for lunch and dinner, and, of course, we just had to visit the Mall! Because Mother was so physically weak, it was absolutely necessary to have someone else with us when we went places. Getting her from her wheelchair and into the car, and then back into her wheelchair was always a very tricky move, requiring the utmost coordination to keep from dropping her. Taking her to the bathroom in a public place was incredibly difficult.

I knew that if Mother began to feel she was a burden, she would refuse to leave her room. To keep that from happening, I had to find a way to help her get in and out of her wheelchair without all of us constantly being afraid that she would get hurt, that we would drop her, or that we would sustain back injuries or otherwise get hurt trying to move her in or out of awkward places (like the front seat of a car) or prevent her from falling. The thought that these continuing "wheelchair struggles" might one day interfere with our fun made me keep searching for a solution.

When I was in Muskogee, I always stayed in the house where I was raised -- the place where Mother had her music school and I had taught ballet. I slept in my grandfather's bed in the room he used for an office when he wrote the sermons he delivered as a Baptist minister. One morning, I was lying in bed trying to decide what I might be able to do to make it easier to move Mother in and out of her wheelchair, I thought, "Oh, dear God, why didn't you make the human body with handles?" Suddenly, I had an inspiration! What Mother really needed was a piece of clothing that had "handles", something that would give us a good grip while lifting her but which would not be uncomfortable for her to wear or put undue pressure on her body. At the same time, I knew that I could never get my Mother to wear a dull institutional-looking garment. After all, she

was a singer and an artist and I had always thought of her as my "glamour girl." I could not even think of asking her to wear something that did not have style. I had a childhood girl friend in Muskogee help me with my first attempt to make what I called the "lift vest" - a vest with a webbing harness attached that could be used for lifting, but which would not be uncomfortable. After that, I kept working on new models trying to perfect the design. As I worked late at night, I couldn't help thinking that I was sewing in the very same room where my mother had often stayed up all night making my ballet costumes.

Several samples later, I decided on the basic design: a good-looking Western style vest made of cotton denim, with Navajo trimming and metal buffalo buttons -- to commemorate Mother's heritage. The stylish design could be worn by both men and women. It did not have that sterile institutional appearance and would make sure that the wearer did not look old or infirm. Sadly, Mother passed away quite suddenly -- before I could finish a model of the LiftVest for her to wear. But her death gave me renewed determination to go on developing the LiftVest in her honor. I knew very well that she would have wanted me to continue -- because she was aware that there were many, many other wheelchair users and families who desperately needed the freedom and safety it offers.

I am also sure that Mother would be very proud that I am among the few women who have ever been awarded a patent by the United States Government (U.S. Pat. No. 6122,778), that I got it for the vest she inspired, and that public response to the LiftVest has been so overwhelmingly enthusiastic!

— Cynthia Price Cohen, Ph.D.

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