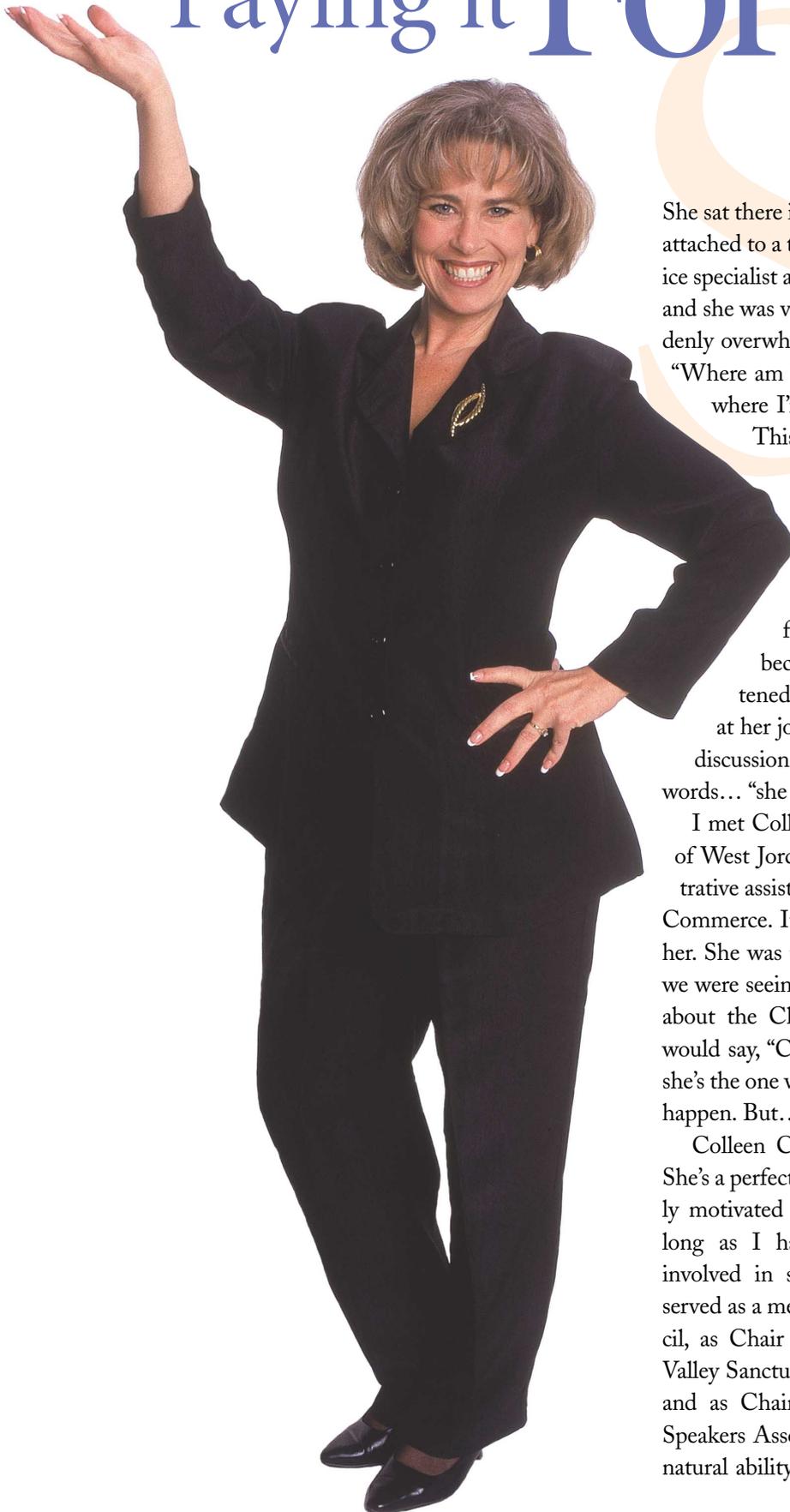


# Paying it Forward

by Ken Miller

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She sat there in her four by four foot cubical with her ear attached to a telephone wire. Her job as a customer service specialist at the call center helped pay the family bills, and she was very good at what she did, but she was suddenly overwhelmed with some very powerful thoughts: “Where am I? This is not where I belong! This is not where I’m supposed to be! This is not who I am! This isn’t even what I look like!” It was 1993 and Colleen Cook felt trapped in a world that didn’t understand her.

This wasn’t the first time Colleen had been frustrated and felt like she had been passed over in favor of lesser qualified people because of her weight. I know, because I was there a few years earlier and listened to the discussions about how good she was at her job. But no matter how good she was, those discussions were always followed by these five little words... “she has that weight problem.”

I met Colleen in 1990 while I was serving as mayor of West Jordan, Utah. Colleen served as the administrative assistant to the director of the local Chamber of Commerce. It seems like everywhere I went I ran into her. She was the driving force behind the rapid growth we were seeing in the Chamber. Whenever a discussion about the Chamber came up someone in the group would say, “Colleen ought to be the Chamber director, she’s the one who’s doing all the work and making things happen. But... she has that weight problem.”

Colleen Cook improves things wherever she goes. She’s a perfect example of those highly energetic, strongly motivated people we call “movers and shakers.” As long as I have known Colleen she’s been actively involved in some form of community service. She’s served as a member of a local hospital community council, as Chair of the Board of Trustees for the South Valley Sanctuary, a shelter for domestic violence victims and as Chair of the Utah Chapter of the National Speakers Association. She’s full of new ideas and has a natural ability to see the core issues and the right solu-

tions to problems so she always seems to rise to the top of any organization she joins. The organizations she joins always grow and flourish under her leadership, but it hasn't always been that way.

Colleen spent many frustrating years offering wise counsel to people who ignored her because of her weight. Finally, one day, she had had enough. She knew that if she was to become all that she could and should be, she would have to make the very drastic decision to have weight-loss surgery. A difficult decision to be sure, but having the deep-seated belief that successful people do those things that unsuccessful people are not willing to do, she decided to take the step that would move her into the life she always dreamed of. It was 1993 when she decided weight-loss surgery was her answer. There was just one problem; she couldn't afford it, and her

I'll never forget the first time I heard Colleen give a speech. She was the keynote speaker at the West Jordan Women in Business Conference, and I was invited because of my position as mayor. I was astounded at the level of professionalism she displayed. I knew she was a great organizer, but I was humbled by her speaking ability. I had given my share of speeches, but I don't believe I ever performed as well as Colleen did on that occasion. Since then I've had the opportunity to see her present numerous classes, speeches and keynote presentations, and I'm still amazed at her abilities each time I hear her speak.

I learned one of my favorite maxims from Colleen: "It costs no more to dream a big dream than it does to dream a little dream." One of Colleen's lifelong dreams was the desire to be a professional speaker who would



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— Colleen Cook

insurance wouldn't cover the procedure. So, she waited and did the best she could with the opportunities that came to her. In December of 1995, Colleen and her husband, Roger, took out a second mortgage on their home and invested \$15,000 in her health. "Some of my friends were getting new furniture, some new cars," she said, "and I got a new body!"

When I learned that Colleen was in the hospital and had undergone gastric bypass surgery, I was happy for her. If this weight-loss surgery thing could help her get her weight under control, I knew she'd be off and running, rocking the world somewhere. I didn't see her much during the next year, so I was absolutely astounded at the new Colleen I saw the next time we met. She was literally one half the woman she used to be! She weighed 250 pounds when she had surgery, and now she weighed a mere 125 pounds and moved with style and grace. I could understand what she meant when she'd told me years earlier that what I saw wasn't what she really looked like. She'd always been a nice looking, well dressed professional woman, but now there was an unmistakable radiance about her. She literally glowed with enthusiasm and joy for life and her future.

speak to thousands of people in locations all across North America. She started her speaking career well before her surgery, with her main topic being personal motivation and challenging people to "Aspire Higher"; to reach beyond their present limitations and dream big dreams.

Colleen has always known her true abilities were not limited by her actual weight; the limitations that were imposed upon her existed in someone else's mind, not hers, and now that she was "normal" there was no stopping her. Grateful for her new self, Colleen recognized the role that she could play in encouraging and motivating other pre- and post-op weight-loss surgery patients. In 1997, she accepted a position with a Salt Lake City hospital to develop their bariatric program and coordinate their support group effort.

Through her affiliations with bariatric practices throughout the country, Colleen recognized the need for improved quality and consistency of the programs being offered, so she developed a Nationwide Support Group Leader Training program. She could also see that weight-loss surgery patients needed a well organized system of education and support that could serve them

throughout their lifetime, whenever they needed it and wherever they lived. She could clearly see that surgeons' offices and hospitals, while they were providing great medical care, were not prepared to provide long-term education and support. Some were better than others at providing support for new patients, but those that were, were not too pleased with the prospect of providing services to floundering patients from other hospitals and other doctors who did not have programs in place.

Through her years of studying popular and famous speakers, she knew that the best speakers drew their speeches from a wealth of personal experience; they talked about things they knew from their own personal adventures in the world. Now she faced something of a dilemma; people wanted to hear her talk about her weight-loss journey, but she was concerned because she didn't want to become known as, "that gal who used to be fat, and had that surgery, and now she goes around talking about it." She wanted to be known for who she was and what she could do, not for what she once weighed. Remember, it was 1997, and the big boom in weight-loss surgery had not hit the world yet; and she didn't yet know who she was going to become.

## Success habits of long-term gastric bypass patients

In June of 1998, Colleen presented a report to the American Society for Bariatric Surgery entitled, "The Success Habits of Long-Term Gastric Bypass Patients." Her report was the result of research that was prompted by a question posed by a bariatric surgeon in a meeting Colleen attended. He asked, "Why can one patient who has this surgical procedure maintain weight loss year after year, and another patient, who has the identical procedure, lose substantial weight and then regain it?" Colleen surveyed hundreds of patients, searching for the common traits of patients who successfully reached their goal weight and then maintained their weight loss over time. She also surveyed those who failed to reach their goal weight or who regained significant weight as the years went by. From her research she identified six habits or behavior patterns that are common to successful



Top left: Colleen at age eight. Top right: Colleen in 1995 prior to her weight loss surgery. Bottom: Colleen with her family in 1995

WLS patients and also showed that those who were unsuccessful had the absence of one or more of those same habits. From this foundation Colleen has built patient education and support programs that teach these Success Habits™ principles to new patients, and she has continued to observe the success of those who follow the Success Habits™ lifestyle and the poorer results that come to those who make different choices.

In late fall of 1999, Colleen came to me with the idea of creating an independent support center that would provide long-term education and support for WLS patients regardless of where they had surgery, who their



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doctor was or what type of procedure they chose. For months we investigated the possibility, planned, strategized and by January 1, 2000, she was set up and ready to start supporting patients through Bariatric Support Center, Inc.

Just as she was finally starting to get the opportunities and recognition she deserved, she was knocked down again. In early February of 2000, right after the start-up of BSC, she acquired office space that had to be completely gutted and remodeled to provide a training room, reception area, and her office. Just as the contractors were tearing into the walls and ripping the place up, Colleen began to experience abdominal pains that wouldn't go away. She went in to the Emergency Room. They ran tests and removed her gall bladder laparoscopically. More pain, more tests. Finally, her surgeon opened her up for exploratory surgery and discovered that a section of her bowel was folded back inside itself and the folded area was dying. A section of her bowel was removed and we almost lost her. She was pretty loopy for a couple of days, but she came storming back and finished creating her Bariatric Support Center that now serves as the model for other centers around the country. The hospital was happy; they saved thousands from their annual budget. The surgeon's were happy; their business increased by 35 percent the first year the center was in operation. The patients were happy because they were getting the best support program anyone in the Intermountain area had ever seen.

Perhaps her most valuable character trait is Colleen's willingness to take others along for the ride when she sets her mind to improving the way things are. She is a team builder who doesn't care who gets the credit for the accomplishments that result from her leadership. One of her favorite quotes is framed and prominently displayed in her office: "There is nothing that can't be accomplished when the right people are swept up in a worthy cause divorced from who gets credit for what." – Cavett Robert. People who work with her consider it a privilege to be part of her team. Each team member can give numerous examples of how working with Colleen has improved their skills and their lives.

One afternoon in 2001, Colleen called me to discuss what it would take to replicate her center at numerous locations across the United States and build a network of affiliated support groups that would provide high quality support to patients regardless of where they lived or moved during their lifetime. Out of those discussions came the birth of our company, Bariatric Support Centers International (BSCI). As you may surmise from the name, we expanded her vision to include other countries outside the United States. We are in the early stages of building Colleen's dream of a network of support groups with well trained leaders who recognize the advantages that come to their patients when they are part of a network of independently operated support groups. We're also building an online network of support moderated by bariatric professionals in the fields of nursing, nutrition, mental health and exercise.

## Working to form a national network of support

One day in the not too distant future, WLS patients will be able to undergo surgery on one coast and then move to the other coast and know they will be able to attend a high quality support group near their new home, a support group that teaches weight-loss and maintenance principles that have been thoroughly proven in the real world. Surgeons, hospitals and independent support group leaders are beginning to recognize the strength that will come to the entire field of bariatrics through the formation of a national network of high quality education and support groups. As that network develops, more and more "orphaned" patients who have little or no contact with their surgeon's office will have places to go where they can get the long-term support they need from trained, qualified leaders. When that happens, everyone in the field of bariatrics will benefit from the increased patient success rate that will result.

As the WLS patient population grows and becomes more experienced, people are beginning to recognize what Colleen has understood for a long time. A patient's choice of surgeon and type of WLS procedure is very

important, but their choice of a long-term education and support program is equally important to their being able to achieve their weight-loss goal and then being able to maintain that success throughout their lifetime.

Long after the surgeon and hospital have finished their jobs, patients will continue to need support and education about the latest advances in lifestyle choices that will help them live long and healthy lives. No one understands those issues better than the collective wisdom of the actual patients themselves. No one studies which lifestyles are most successful and which choices lead to failure and disappointment more intensely than those people, like Colleen, who have dedicated their lives to helping others achieve the same level of success

she has achieved. But personal success was never enough for Colleen; she's always been a believer in the principle of Paying It Forward and she encourages others to do the same.

If you ever have the opportunity to listen to Colleen speak, you'll probably hear her quote Nido Qubein by heart: "Service is the rent we pay to live on this planet. We have all warmed ourselves by fires we did not build, and drunk from wells we did not dig. We must now, dig more wells and build more fires." – Nido Qubein

And, if you ever get the opportunity to meet Colleen in person, you'll find that it's nearly impossible to be in the same room with her without having her build a fire in your heart. ■



It is so very important that we, as today's weight-loss surgery patients, recognize and are grateful to courageous souls who opted to have weight-loss surgery when it wasn't the 'in thing' to do – those daring few from the late 70's and early 80's who experienced both successes and failures and in doing so have provided us with greater understanding of what it takes to make the surgical treatment of obesity our answer. Has someone led the way for you, inspired you, encouraged you? Often weight-loss surgery patients express heartfelt gratitude not only to their surgeons for having saved their life, but to friends and family members, neighbors, work associates and even strangers who have motivated them and provided them with the encouragement and support they needed to move forward on their journey.

To those looking for a way to express their gratitude, may I encourage you to turn and help others along their way. Become involved; lead a support group; become a volunteer; serve on a patient committee; lobby for better insurance coverage for weight-loss surgery; help new or struggling patients with online posts or encouragement and support. Give back by paying it forward.

– Colleen Cook, from her book:

*The Success Habits of Weight-Loss Surgery Patients*