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BODY

FROM CHEMOTHERAPY PATIENTS TO CAROL CHANNING, NO ONE'S BIGGER IN WIGS THAN RALPH MOLLIKA



"This business is trickery," allows Mollica, who insisted on two fittings to insure 19-year-old Cindy Allen a perfectly natural look (right). Allen's doctors are unable to diagnose her condition. Sometimes she is totally bald; at best, she has only a few locks of hair (above).



When Cindy Allen was 8, her hair, eyebrows and eyelashes mysteriously fell out. Specialists failed to come up with a diagnosis, but one thing was clear: Cindy would have to resort to wearing a wig until the trouble could be identified.

"She had a tough time," says her

mother, Marilyn, of those early wig-wearing days. "Kids used to pull them off." Cindy, now a sophomore at the University of Miami, still does not know why she is bald. But since she was referred to Manhattan wigmaker Ralph Mollica five years ago, she has at least overcome the cosmetic problem. "I get

them wet in school showers and blow-dry them on my head," she says of her three Mollica wigs. "I go dancing and they never budge." Mrs. Allen sees other benefits: "Cindy went through a dramatic change; her confidence improved as the wigs got better."

That's the idea, of course. Mollica,

Photographs by Raeanne Rubenstein

CONTINUED

BODY

35, estimates that 85 percent of the patrons at his East Side salon named Raffaele and Paul (Mollica's partner is hairdresser Paul Matthews) are people who lost their hair due to accidents or illness. They include burn victims and cancer patients undergoing chemo-

therapy. Mollica figures that since his wigs raise self-esteem, they subliminally hasten recovery. "Appearance matters greatly to these people," explains Syracuse psychiatrist Dr. David Perry. "It's partly an effort to reaffirm life—even in the face of deformity and death."

Not all of Mollica's customers come

to him out of desperation. Over the past 15 years he has concocted coifs for the likes of Loretta Young, Carol Channing and Louise Lasser. But Ralph doesn't cultivate his celebrity trade. "My radiation patients need me," he says, "but if Dolly Parton called me to do her wigs and I was watching a basketball game on TV, I wouldn't go."

Mollica is sought after because each of his wigs is virtually indistinguishable from a natural head of hair. It starts with a silk gauze cap, which is custom-fitted to the contours of the client's head. Using human hair imported from Italy, Mollica then boils, soaks, curls and heats the strands to create various textures. Every wig is a blend of several shades. "No real head of hair has a consistent color," Mollica explains. But the best feature is that the wig does not require professional care and can be washed and restyled by the owner. Ralph's tangle-free technique is top secret, but it has to do with the way he anchors each strand flush with the cap (most wigs have a few inches of hair on the underside). Because of such painstaking attention, Mollica turns out only one wig a week. The prices range from \$800 to \$1,500.

He was born in Sicily, but after his builder father died when Ralph was 4, his mother emigrated to New York City and went to work as a seamstress. Following a two-year hitch in the Army, Ralph was hired to make wigs at Kenneth, the chic salon serving Jackie Onassis, Lauren Bacall et al. "I was a peon," he recalls, "but I kept my eyes and ears open." Stints with Vidal Sassoon and Elizabeth Arden followed before Mollica opened his shop three years ago. He now claims 500 clients (including 50 men).

His work week is split between the salon and his Shelter Island home, 100 miles from Manhattan, where he lives with wife Rosalie and 2-year-old son Joseph. The intricate knotting can be done just as well in his living room.

Mollica has offered his services to the American Cancer Society as a wig consultant and believes that any wig necessitated by illness should be a deductible medical expense. He is also on the warpath against the Pill. "You'd be amazed how many girls have lost their hair while on the Pill," he exclaims. "I know. Half of them are my clients."

CHERIE BURNS



Mollica gave Louise Lasser the door when her dog misbehaved, but he did her Mary Hartman braids anyway.

Carol Channing became a Mollica client because she cannot dye her hair; she is allergic to bleach.



TIM BOXER/PICTURE PARADE



Mollica wigs out with son Joseph, 2, and wife Rosalie, whom he has known since childhood. "She was scrawny," he recalls.