

# A Woman Who Would Not Be Discarded

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On the morning of that day in August 1992 when Linda Solsbury came to visit, I'd volunteered to be a dunking booth target at the annual Stonington Village Fair.

I dutifully sat there, perched above the tub and weathering, as I recall, the disconcerting accuracy of the right arm of Edith Paffard, mother-in-law of Congressman Rob Simmons, who had Simmons' two young children by her side. Righteously soaked and with no time to towel off, I got home just as Solsbury arrived.

It was a day, long in the planning, in which my role as a journalist got blurred as well as, I suppose, got me drenched.

Solsbury, who died at 57 last week at a New Britain hospital of complications following gall bladder surgery, had been the subject of news stories and columns since March 1991. She'd been awarded \$10 million by a civil jury after being left mute and paralyzed following a 1985 stroke that the jury agreed was a consequence of chiropractic manipulation of her neck.

At the time, it was the largest award bestowed by a civil jury in New London County. But Solsbury, who'd been a licensed practical nurse on Lawrence & Memorial Hospital's pediatric floor, and a dancer, essentially received nothing. The chiropractor declared bankruptcy.

When I first wrote about the case, shortly after the award, I expressed skepticism about whether Solsbury would ever receive the \$10 million and questioned why her attorney, Gene Swain, then of Suisman, Shapiro in New London, didn't pursue a settlement.

Solsbury, unable to speak but with minimal ability to move her right hand, sent me a typed response from her room at what was then New Britain Memorial Hospital and now the Hospital for Special Care.

She said the \$10 million was based on the projected cost for her physical and medical care and an adapted private dwelling. "It is not my intent to sound like 'poor pitiful me,' " she wrote. "I think there is a certain general consensus that 'The state provides for her needs.' The state basically provides (if closely scrutinized) on the level of animal needs. There is an overriding 'herd' mentality. It erodes your sense of self and there is a continual struggle to resist that."

She invited me to New Britain. I spent an afternoon, standing over her shoulder as she, in a wheelchair, methodically typed on a computer answers to my questions. In the quiet of her room, I was smitten. Solsbury was a lovely woman, her brownish hair cut to chin-length, her hazel eyes alert and expressive, her makeup spare and flattering. She had been trapped, irrevocably, by the stroke, suspended alive inside a listless body, but the delicacy of her wrist moving over the keyboard, and the candor of her words, and her humor, made her a formidable presence.

I kept writing about her, and, days before her 43rd birthday, opened our house and gardens in Stonington to her and her friends, most of them nurses who'd worked with her, for an outing. It was an arduous undertaking, involving a special transit van as well as several hospital personnel.

The afternoon was splendid, wide blue skies and early August sun, and Solsbury, in her motorized wheelchair, was parked in the shade of an apple tree, framed by borders of bright flowers. Journalists, bound by the straights and narrows of objectivity, aren't supposed to extend their apple trees. I wish I'd done it again.

We communicated in the ensuing years, but I saw less of her. The last time was when she came to New London a couple of summers ago to be with her daughter, Stacy Madden, and two grandsons.

To the end, she fought to make the public aware of chiropractic risks. She never ceased observing or, so long as her wrist allowed, typing. She did not let herself become invisible, or, worse for Solsbury, discarded.

I don't intend to trivialize her by evoking a song, but I cannot listen to Eva Cassidy, a singer who died of cancer at age 33, and her cover of Christine McVeigh's "Songbird" without thinking about Linda Solsbury:

For you there'll be no crying

For you, the sun will be shining

And so it will remain for me and my absorbing sense of her, and that August day she came to visit.

This is the opinion of Steven Slosberg.