

Linda's impact on my life

by Blake Bars

Linda and Dennis opened Nature's Pantry 38 years ago on July 1, 1986. This was after they had sold a much more lucrative nursing home business. In the nursing home business, Linda had been witnessing the poor quality of life that poor health choices led to. She had developed a passion for leading people to vibrant health naturally in large part because of a book she read called the Ministry of Healing. Eventually, she decided it would be more beneficial to help people earlier in their lives. After some thought and prayer, Linda and Dennis decided they were willing to sell the nursing home, but they wanted to be sure it was God's will, so they told God that they would sell if He would send them a buyer. Not long later, a hospital administrator from the west side came inquiring if they were interested in selling. After some conversations and an agreement that the new owners would not fire the long-standing employees to hire younger, cheaper workers, a deal was made and Nature's Pantry was born. It started as a tiny, little vitamin shop and in those early years they didn't take much income, if any. Slowly, over time, they added grocery and produce items and the rest is history.

Interestingly, Linda did not inherit great genes or health habits from her family, and she had not been raised in a way that put much importance on a relationship with God. But because of important influences in her life, like her grandfather, Linda began to learn how important our choices and habits are for our health, and that our health was not just physical but also spiritual. Linda developed a love for God, a love for people, and a passion for teaching natural health principles that could improve our whole lives: body, mind and soul. Linda's life verse was 3 John 1:2: "Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things, and be in health, just as your soul prospers."

Linda was not perfect and those of us who knew her well, knew her quirks, but she had a desire to share the love of her perfect Heavenly Father with those whom her life touched. Many of us in this room knew this about her and were so blessed to have had her attention as she gave us instruction for our health, listened to our struggles, and counseled us with wisdom. Linda could be blunt but almost always had a loving countenance and an occasional wry smile. She had had a way of telling it to us straight whether we were a little overweight or just making bad choices. Somehow, she could do it while making us feel loved and not judged.

I hadn't been in Nature's Pantry since I was a kid when we used to go in there all the time to get fruit leathers and blue sky soda. But I was living wild and I needed to get clean for a UA, so I went to Nature's Pantry to get some Sonne 7 because my friends told me it worked. On my way to the checkout, Linda stopped me (she had known me since I was a baby because we went to church together): "Oh hello Blake how are you? I see you're taking good care of yourself," she said with a big smile and a hand on my shoulder. I knew she knew but even though I knew she didn't approve of my lifestyle, I still felt loved and cared for.

Years later, I was doing odd jobs for my Dad who had his Aflac office in the building that Dennis owned which used to be an old Chinese restaurant . . . I think it had been Fong's. I was in the back working and Dennis walked in. He looked at me, then looked around at all the Chinese food grease on the walls, and then back at me and said, "Well, the only place to go from here is up." Little did he know that he would be hiring me to learn his business in not the too distant future.

When I started at Nature's Pantry, one of the first things Linda had me do was clean all the shelves in the entire store. It took me like three months and during that process I learned where everything was and I

learned a ton about health and health products. Looking back at it now, it really reminds me of the movie Karate Kid when Mr. Miyagi makes Daniel sand his deck, paint his fence and work on his car. Daniel thought these were menial tasks, but later he realized the magnitude of what he had gained while performing these chores.

My first few years at NP, I didn't care too much about health, but I had just earned my MBA and I was all about business. I had visions of making Nature's Pantry a chain of stores. I was all about perfecting the business systems and the business model so it could be duplicated in more locations. Linda saw my passion and drive, but all the while she was praying that I would develop a passion for health someday, because to Linda, Nature's Pantry had always been much more than just a business.

Over the first several years as I learned more and more about natural health and applied it to my life, I started to really become interested. I learned how important your stomach acid is for breaking down food and absorbing nutrients and I was able to get off my heartburn medicine by cleaning up my diet and taking digestive enzymes. I heard countless success stories from Linda, other team members, and customers. I learned how to strengthen my immune system with diet and lifestyle and beat colds with vitamins and herbs.

I read a book called Small Giants about companies who chose to be great instead of big, and I started to see the value in staying put, developing strong relationships, and serving one community, rather than trying to spread myself and my company over multiple locations. And as Linda had done, I decided to choose principle over profit.

A few years ago, I completed a faith-based leadership program called the Timothy Project. Throughout the course of this program, I learned that my life verse was the same as Linda's life verse and my life's mission was to continue her life mission. In my drinking and logging days, I used to tell people I smelt like Hams beer and wood chips. I would have fell over dead if you had told me I was going to trade the chaps for an apron and smell like granola and garlic the rest of my life. But the way it came about . . . I was accepting of it, and actually very excited! In AA, we have a saying that life has a way of beating us into a state of reasonableness . . . and . . . I guess you could say, I had been through enough at that point in my life that I had become reasonable enough. I guess sometimes God brings us the teacher when we are ready to learn the lesson.

For me, Linda was one of those teachers. She taught me the natural principles of health and healing, she modeled to me how to love and serve well, she showed me the character of our loving Heavenly Father, and she inspired me to follow in her footsteps. My life is founded on what she built, and I'm forever grateful to her.

When it came to diet and healthy habits, Linda always told us to NOT focus on getting rid of all the bad things in the world, because we'll get overwhelmed and give up, but rather to focus on adding in the good thing at a time, one by one. Then over time, a lot of the bad stuff just gets crowded out.

One of my favorite things to share with people is Linda's WHOLENESS acronym. You find the flyer with Linda's WHOLENESS acronym in store at Nature's Pantry or on our website. W=Water H=Healthy Habit O=Outside Air L=Love E=Exercise and Elimination N=Nutrition. E=Endorphins S=Sunshine S=Sleep. These basic health principles are things that we all know, but we don't all put into practice. Furthermore, we have come to forget or disbelieve the importance and power of these principles.

In our world today, we like fast food and quick fixes. We tend to overlook the basics of health and go right to the high-tech facility, or latest drug, or surgical procedure that cost thousands and requires high-end insurance. We focus on treating just the physical symptoms and we often don't look for the underlying causes.

Linda was not opposed to medical advancement, but she believed in treating the whole person: body, mind and soul. She would agree with Plato who said that you ought not attempt to heal the body without treating also the soul. Linda would remind us that ultimately, our healing doesn't come from human hands, but that God is the healer of our souls. And, in regards to wholistic health, she taught us that some of the most powerful healing mechanisms that God has given us are FREE. Things like: deep breathing, sunshine, fresh air, water, sleep, exercise, stretching, herbs, plants, time in nature, self-control, fasting, solitude, social interaction, human touch, hugs, smiles, forgiveness, positive thinking, gratitude, prayer, generosity, charity, faith, hope, love and the gift of salvation.

And while these simple and powerful health principles are free, it does take effort and discipline on our part to reap the fruit from their practice. Isn't it ironic that we are in an era where we are having to relearn basic human health skills like breathing, walking, sleeping, loving, drinking clean water and eating real food? I've heard it said that HOPE is two things: the will to live and the way to live. And a will to live without the way to live is just a wish. Friends, Linda was in the business of hope. She reminded us of what it is to be human and she taught us HOW TO LIVE.

Linda would want us to learn how to live by these principles so that we could reach the full human potential and purpose that God made us for. She would want us to live in the present and love and serve well, but she would not want us to focus so much on our temporary bodies that we lose sight of things with eternal value. Linda would tell us that in this broken world, even a life lived well . . . is cut short. Yes, our health choices will very much affect our quality of life and how well we can execute our purpose, but in the end, even when we eat right, exercise, and answer the call God puts on our lives, we're still going to face death. Friends, this is why we need Jesus. There is no diet, there is no exercise, there is no medical advancement, there is no cure for sin and death. Nothing from our own hands, or our own works, or our own strength can save us . . . ONLY JESUS. The gift of salvation cannot be earned, it can only be accepted for it is by grace, through faith we are saved (Ephesians 2:8-9), and it is because God loves us so much that He sent His Son, JESUS to provide the way for us so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. – John 3:16

Beloved, our life here is temporary, and although we get glimpses of God's beauty and the way things were meant to be through people like Linda, all too often we're reminded that the beauty in this broken place is not without pain and that this life is quickly fading . . . just a vapor . . . here today, gone tomorrow.

In the book of Revelation, God promises a hope and a future where He will be with His people and He will wipe every tear from their eyes and there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain. For the old order of things will have passed away and He will make everything NEW! – Revelation 21:3-5

Jesus said to his disciples "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms . . . And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." - John 14:1-3 If you don't know it yet, Jesus will prepare a room for you too. He is knocking at the door of our hearts. – Revelation 3:20. We must only invite Him in.

Friends, in closing, I pray as Linda prayed, that you may prosper in all things and be in health just as your soul prospers.