


Angel Faces

A couple of years ago, Calais Weber had boys and college on the mind — typical business for a high school junior. The tall and slender Ohio beauty was looking forward to the summer before her senior year, when she planned to meet with a modeling agency in New York. The daughter of a former model, Weber hoped her good looks might help cover her tuition at a top college.

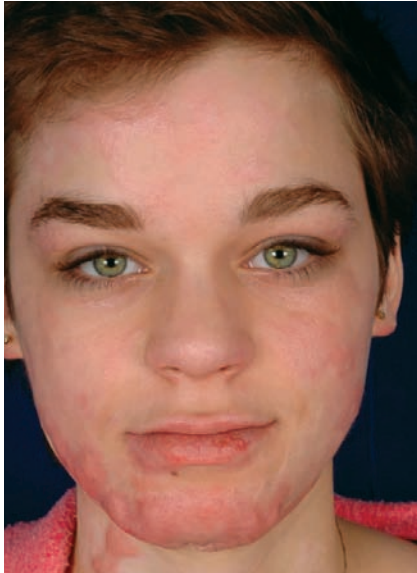
Then, on January 23, 2006, Weber's life changed in an instant. She was in chemistry lab, waiting for that day's experiment to begin. As Weber remembers it, the teacher was more focused on her 11-year-old son — who was playing hooky from school to watch the demonstration — than her students, who weren't wearing goggles or protective clothing. The teacher poured a gallon of methanol on an open flame.

"I was hit with a three-foot-wide fireball," says Weber. "The teacher told everyone to run, and everyone did, including the teacher, after she put her son out. I had to try to put myself out. The janitor saved me."

Weber spent a week in a chemically induced coma and remained hospitalized for



Lesia Cartelli and
Calais Weber



two-and-a-half months. Her injuries were so severe that the Red Cross flew her brother, a soldier in the army, back from Iraq for ten days to see her in the burn unit.

“It didn’t hit me while I was in the hospital how bad it was,” Weber recalls. “I thought I’d get back to school and everything would be normal. Sure, I’d have some scars, but how bad could it be? But then on one of my trips to the bathroom, I looked in the mirror and that’s when it hit me. I became very depressed. At many points I lost the will to live.”

Weber returned to school wearing a full-face plastic mask and a one-piece pressure garment. She says many of her friends retreated after they saw her disfiguring burns, which covered her lower face, stomach, and legs. Those who didn’t leave initially were driven away by Weber’s growing anger and resentment.

“I felt like an eyesore just going out in public,” Weber explains. “I was going through such a huge amount of depression that it caused me to not be a nice person.”

During her senior year, Weber underwent painful laser surgeries,

steroid injections, and Z-plasties to help with her scarring, as well as treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and extensive rehabilitation. At one point, her physical therapist referred her to a makeup artist named Nancy Augden-West, who specializes in camouflaging facial disfigurement. Augden-West told Weber about a San Diego nonprofit organization called Angel Faces, which offers an annual retreat for young female burn victims.

Weber balked at first, arguing that there were plenty of girls out there more worthy of such a program. But Augden-West persisted, and eventually Weber agreed to fly to San Diego (the program that year had already reached its capacity of 20 sponsored girls, so Weber paid her own way). A couple of days before the retreat, Weber met Lesia Cartelli, the founder and director of Angel Faces. When she was younger, Cartelli had been gravely injured in a house fire.

“I didn’t want girls to endure the pain that I went through as a girl with severe burns,” says Cartelli. “I knew in my heart that with encouragement and direction the girls could learn how to embrace their injuries and create the life they wanted. I wanted to teach the girls not to let their burns, or their facial differences, define who they really were.”

Weber, now a 17-year-old freshman at Wellesley College, says her life changed in an instant once again — this time for the better. At Angel Faces, she met one-on-one with Cartelli and a cadre of specialists and psychologists, who taught her how to cope with her injuries and respond with strength and dignity to staring and uninvited inquiries. She also got a makeover during the retreat’s spa day.

“Most things do not happen overnight,” says Weber. “But I felt a huge change in

myself. I went back home with a different attitude. Both my parents noted that I was back to being my own self. I was almost happier than I was before the fire. There’s probably not a single teenage girl who is 100 percent comfortable in her own skin, regardless of whether she has any disfigurement. After Angel Faces, I felt better in my own skin, even with my scars, than I did before. I felt like a stronger person than I had ever been.”

— AnnaMaria Stephens

Angel Faces

Year Founded: 2003

Overall Mission: Angel Faces is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide healing retreats designed to inspire adolescent girls with severe facial burns or disfigurements to achieve their optimum potential and develop meaningful relationships for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Current Funding Objectives: To increase the budget to grow the retreats to two or more per year.

Donation Administration Cost Ratio: 20 percent administrative, 80 percent program.

Organization’s Biggest Challenge: Funding.

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