



Finding life's puzzle

LINDA HOOD

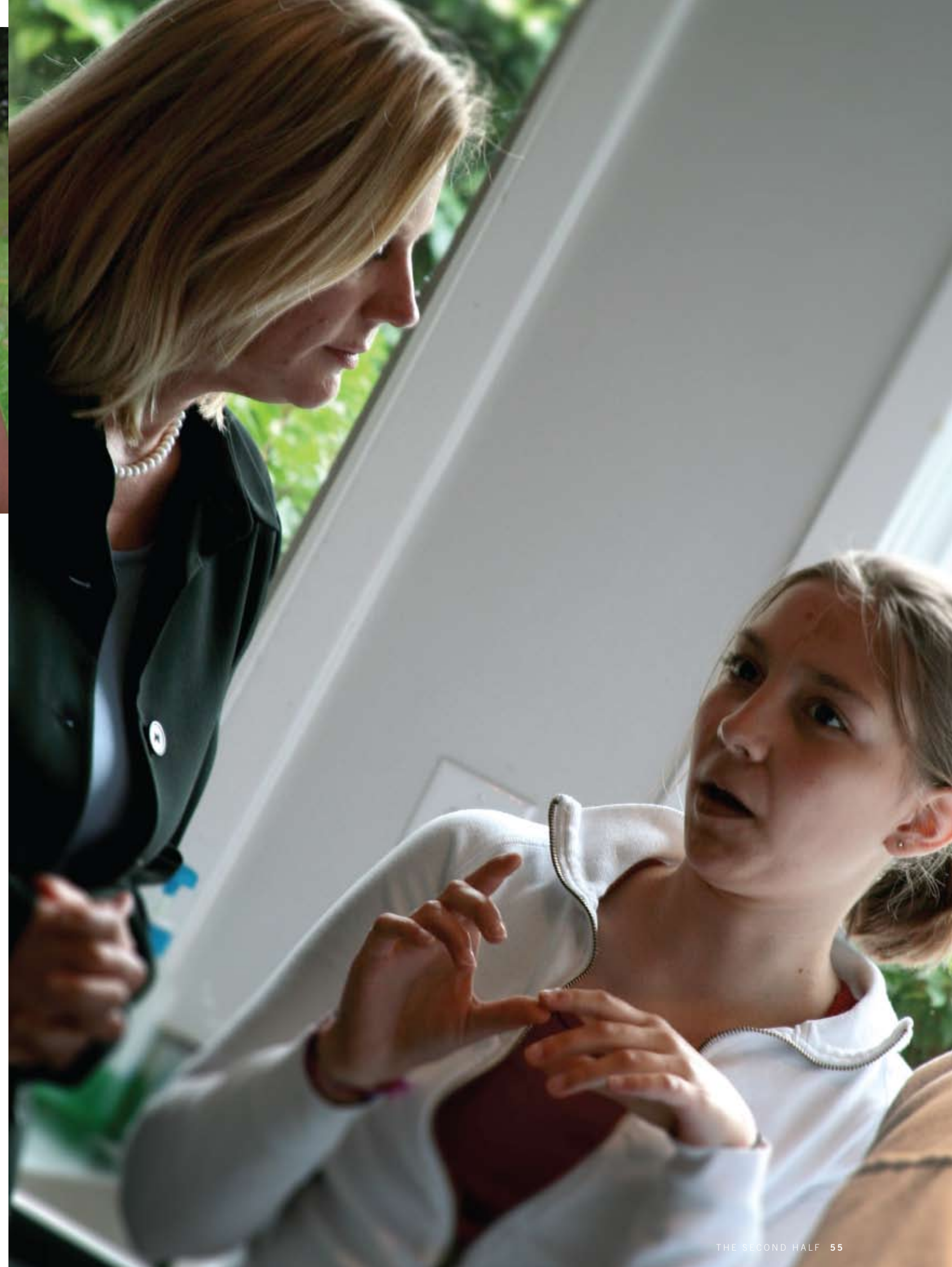
Linda Hood and I sat down to chat in a noisy, crowded coffee shop – not the ideal place for me to ask Linda's advice about something one of our teenage girls was wrestling with.

In a matter of moments, though, the noise and confusion faded into the distance, and we were well past small talk and deep into life issues. From the tears in her eyes, I could tell Linda really cared about every word I shared.

Like many successful women, Linda often gets pegged as a crisp, well-organized executive who knows how to drive for results. In my view, that's only part of who Linda is. Yes, she rose to the top of Wells Fargo Bank by being effective. But down deep, she has a huge heart – particularly for young women in need.

Today she's the executive director of a fast-growing international ministry that serves young women dealing with addictions, eating disorders and abuse. But that role often keeps her insulated from the pain and the triumph in the lives of these women. She has given up so many perks of the executive life that I was curious what had captured her heart about giving her second half to serving these women.





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As she looked across the coffee shop and into the distance, she told me about the first time she greeted a family as they dropped off their daughter at a Mercy Ministries home. The mom, dad and daughter looked worn down, physically and emotionally. Linda could see the sense of hopelessness in their faces as they hauled in baggage filled with pain: An unexpected pregnancy? Depression? Addiction? Abuse? Linda couldn’t be sure, but they were walking right toward her and the inevitable interaction caused her to pause. It wasn’t her job, but she knew in that moment she had to greet them.

“I thought, ‘I’ve got to let them know what we’re about,’” Linda says.

So she introduced herself in a nice, formal handshake way, then opened up her heart. “It’s OK to cry,” she told the young girl. “We’re going to cry with you. We’re going to get you through this.”

“I gave her a big hug, and she started sobbing,” Linda says. “I reached over and I gave her mom a hug, and I said, ‘It’s going to be OK. We’re going to love your daughter as much as you love your daughter.’ She cried, and she said, ‘Oh thank you so much.’”

Linda sometimes feels her work life lacks pizzazz, and that used to bother her. “What I do is the stuff others don’t want to do,” she says. “I keep lists. I follow up on stuff. At Wells Fargo I was known as the great nag.” So Linda keeps a photo album filled with images of women like the one she greeted that day. Each picture reminds her that she’s right where she’s meant to be for the second half of her life.

“I just make sure all the bills are paid, everybody has a paycheck, the lights stay on, and the food comes in,” Linda says. “But when you have those kinds of moments it’s like ... well, you don’t lose those memories.”

So how’d she launch into this second half adventure? Linda grew up in a broken home, got a degree in speech communications because it didn’t require math, married and planned to work until she had children. But her career with Wells Fargo took her to unexpected heights. “It blew me away, to do as well as I did,” she says. “I never wanted it, but once you get in the wheel of it, it’s just an engine.”

Then she made an unusual decision that inexplicably led to a life-changing

second-half career: She dumped the Minnesota Vikings. It sounds crazy, of course, but that’s where it started. Linda and her family lived in Minneapolis, so they were Vikings fans. But one day a star player landed in trouble for mistreating the meter maid in the street. Linda’s son, watching it on the news, thought it was “cool” and Linda didn’t. Looking for better role models, as a family, they dumped the Vikings and adopted the Tennessee Titans. As she began to follow her new team, she noticed its head coach was connected to Mercy Ministries.

Having gone through such brokenness in her own childhood, she was moved to tears by “seeing that there is someplace for people to get their life aligned with the Lord.”

Linda and her husband, David, began donating to the ministry and later she volunteered on projects she could work on from Minnesota. Then the founder of Mercy Ministry, Nancy Alcorn, asked Linda to join their team as COO. It was a perfect fit for her gifts and her 15 years of corporate experience.

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Nancy and allows her to be free to speak the vision, to carry that around the world,” Linda says.

There was a time when Linda hated her gifts. She saw her knack for managing projects and people as “boring” and lacking the glamour she saw attached to the work of so many other executives.

Then one day at work an employee walked into Linda’s corner office asking to go home. She was struggling with a decision about having an abortion. The single mom already had three children, and she told Linda she couldn’t afford another. Linda shut the door, and gave her not only her time but her heart. “I want you to pray, seek whatever higher power you believe in,” she told her. “And I want you to really reflect on whether or not it’s right to stop this pregnancy.” The company had supported the woman through her last pregnancy, and Linda assured her that she’d get that support again if she had this child. Then she promised to still love her no matter what decision she made.

The woman had the baby and still stays in contact with Linda, who encouraged her to go back to school and finish her college degree. For Linda, the experience opened her eyes to the impact she can have regardless of how much pizzazz her daily tasks involve.

“I’m going to be the person behind the scenes, working one-on-one, kicking people in the pants to be a better employee,” she says. “This is where I shine; I will not shine on the stage.”

Linda gets plenty of satisfaction from seeing others take the stage, especially the women who come through Mercy’s program and tell their stories during a graduation ceremony.

“They share the journey that they were on and the journey they went through at Mercy, where God transformed their lives and hope was restored in their hearts. They talk through that in front of their family, the staff, and they are just so grateful,” Linda says. “There are very few dry eyes. Not tears of sorrow. It’s just that you

see how powerful God can be in our lives if we let Him.”

There’s even more impact from Linda’s second-half adventure than you can see in these photos: The impact on her own family. After all, her kids saw their dad put the needs and calling of his wife ahead of his own. And their mom has modeled for them that life isn’t all about her (or them), but about helping others.

“I brought my son to a Mercy graduation, and he left halfway through the testimonies,” she says. “He said, ‘Mom, I’ve got to go outside,’ and he just lost it. He started crying and said, ‘Mom that’s way more than I thought. That’s more than I realized these girls went through.’”

That’s a lasting legacy that Linda simply can’t buy for her kids – she had to model it. [HT](#)

For additional information and helpful Web links related to Linda’s journey from success to significance, visit www.halftime.org/thesecondhalf and click on her name.

