

## Looking for my nearly lost mind

When you think of growing old, what's your greatest fear? Do you worry about having enough income to live on?

I worry about that sometimes. But I think, hey, I've been poor before, there are worse things that could happen. I don't know what those things are, but I'm sure there are lots of them.

Do you fear losing your youth and your get-up-and-go, getting all wrinkled and gray and, of all things, uncool? I don't worry about any of that stuff. It's too late. They already happened to me years ago.

My biggest fear about getting old is simple. I worry that I will spend whatever time I have left wandering the Earth looking for things I can't find. For example:

I can't find my glasses because they're on top my head.

I can't find the glass of water I was drinking because I drank it and put the glass in the sink.

I can't find the keys that I always keep in my purse, because somehow, the first five times I looked for them there, they were nowhere to be seen. Then on the sixth time, when I looked again \_ after taking apart my car, my house and my sanity \_ they showed up, in the purse where I always keep them.

I can swear I spend half my waking hours looking for stuff I can't find. And not just my own stuff. My husband's, too.

Recently, he walked out of the bedroom, where he had been putting away his laundry, and said to me (in that accusing tone he always takes when he tries to blame me for losing or breaking something that he lost or broke himself) "Did you do something with my red boxer shorts? I can't find them anywhere."

"Don't fancy yourself," I said. "What would I possibly do with your red underwear?"

"I know you don't like those shorts," he said. "You told me never to buy red ones again."

Allow me to explain. I come from a long line of germaphobic women who firmly believe that some things \_ sheets, towels and especially undergarments \_ need to be washed in hot water.

Do you know what happens if you wash something red in hot water? That's right, you end up with a whole load of pink.

"The only thing I have against those red boxers," I said, "is they happen to be red. It doesn't mean I got rid of them."

"Well, I looked everywhere," he said, "and I can't find them."

Talk about throwing down the gauntlet. For some reason, if he says he can't find something, I feel duty bound to start looking.

I looked everywhere. In the hamper. The closet. The dresser drawers. Under the bed. Behind the toilet (you don't even want to know what you can find back there.) In the washer and dryer. I even checked the lint screen.

I gave him a look. "Did you leave those shorts some place?"

He rolled his eyes.

"I'm not accusing you," I said, "I'm just saying. They have to be somewhere. How about the case where you keep your bass?"

He plays bass in a band. Sometimes they play late.

"Be serious," he said.

"Well?"

"They're not in my bass case!"

I checked. They weren't there.

Have you ever spent hours looking for something that cost next to nothing and you're not even sorry that it's gone?

"Tell the truth," he said. "Did you give them to Goodwill?"

"I tried," I said, "but they wouldn't take them."

Finally, we gave up and decided to go in the hot tub to soak off a little frustration.

My husband went to the bedroom to change into his swim trunks. A minute later, he came back laughing.

"Look what I found!" he said, waving the boxers like a flag.

"I don't believe it! Where did you find them?"

"Well," he said, with his face turning almost as red as those shorts, "I was wearing them."

If I lose my mind, will you help me find it?

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## BELLAFINA CHOCOLATES



Bar of goodness, Bellafina Chocolates style — and with no preservatives.



Bellafina Chocolates was founded by Brenda Barnicki of Kingsport five years ago with intent upon raising money for children's charities.



Appalachian Thunderstorm, Bellafina's dark chocolate moonshine truffles...with a kick.

BY TOM NETHERLAND  
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD  
COURIER

KINGSPORT, Tenn. — Step inside the home of Scott and Brenda Barnicki.

Their home embodies comfort. Photos of beaming family members share wall space with an observant Abraham Lincoln and art drawn by their son Matthew.

Their kitchen: spotless. Their den: lived in. Their dining room: chocolate factory.

Welcome to Bellafina Chocolates. Brenda Barnicki founded the company five years ago with intent upon raising money to help support a variety of children's charities.

"It was done to give back," said Barnicki, mere steps from her dining room-located chocolate factory — sans Oompa Loompas. "I have been so blessed in my life. Great family. Great education."

She and her husband are engineers. He works at Eastman Chemical Company.

"Through the years I have been exposed to situations that kids were in, just terrible — fighting cancer, family struggles," Barnicki said. "We had always supported charities, so I decided to do something more hands on."

At the time, she worked as a vice president at Eastman.

"I had a great career and wanted to stay there until I retired," Barnicki said.

Ah, but fate has a way of altering folks' best laid plans. And so fate came to pass.

"About three years ago," Barnicki said, "Eastman restructured."

Translated, she lost her cushy job.

"It was traumatic," she said.

Up and up the corporate ladder she had climbed.

"Everyone said, 'you're going to be running this place,'" Barnicki said.

With Eastman, fate determined, no. With Bellafina, why yes indeed.

"It started with dipping truffles in a bowl," she said.

That was five years ago. On Friday, she signed a lease on a 5,000 sq. ft. building in Kingsport, into which Bellafina Chocolates will soon move.

However, the real roots of her charitable endeavor began about 15 years ago.

"I think it started with a recipe out of a cookbook," Barnicki said. "I kept tweaking it."

But why chocolate? She first responded with a look perhaps best reserved for a three-headed alien from outer space destinations unknown.

"Why? Because I'm obsessed with it," she said. "I've been making truffles for people at Christmas for probably 15 years."

She made the truffles by hand, packaged them by hand and delivered them by hand to friends at work.

"It started to grow," Barnicki said. "I'd give them to people at work, to people at Christmas. It was a hobby."

Mind you, for about two years after establishing Bellafina Chocolates as a charitable company, Barnicki's hobby oc-

Life is a box of Chocolates for Kingsport woman



PHOTOS BY TOM NETHERLAND | SPECIAL TO THE HERALD COURIER

Welcome to Kingsport-based Bellafina Chocolates! Company founder and president Brenda Barnicki displays a box of Bellafina's finery at her front door, which is adorned with her son's artwork.

cupied time spent while not working at Eastman. "I started by hand," she said. Two years in, she lost her job, which helped to spur expansion of Bellafina.

"Pretty quickly I thought, 'this is a great opportunity to step back, think about what I want to do with my life,'" she said. "I took a six-month consulting job to think about what I wanted to do. I kept coming back to wanting to grow our chocolate business."

Yet despite having lost her job, Barnicki does not take a salary from Bellafina.

"All 100 percent of our profits after expenses are paid goes to children's charities," she said. "I don't take a salary. Because of that, I've done everything on a shoestring. My family designed the packaging, designed the logo, website — everything."

Regarding the goodies, it's not dollar box chocolates.

"Bellafina's market is kind of a high-end market," Barnicki said. "It's priced similar to Godiva."

For instance, a box of four Bellafina truffles prices at \$7.95. A box of 35 truffles, Bellafina's largest box, goes for \$58.50. Bellafina's most popular line, it's moonshine truffles — yes, moonshine, tags in at \$26.50 for nine "extra-large" truffles. The moonshine truffles come

packaged in apropos fashion: in a mason jar.

"You put moonshine into chocolate and it becomes an entirely different animal," Barnicki said. "It's my favorite. It has a little kick."

Of note, no one can get drunk on Bellafina's moonshine truffles.

"You would have to eat more than 400 truffles to actually get drunk on them," Barnicki said, "which no one can do."

While priced similarly to Godiva Chocolates, Bellafina Chocolates own important distinctions that separate them from their gold-boxed counterparts.

"No preservatives," Barnicki said. "None. No added sugars. Godiva, in order to have a 12-month shelf life, uses preservatives and extra sugars. We don't do that."

Consequently, Bellafina's shelf-life is far shorter than either Godiva or Hershey.

"You'll never see Bellafina in a nationwide grocery store chain," she said. "You can't keep it for long on a shelf. It will last about three weeks."

So, only a three-week shelf life?

"Honestly," Barnicki said, "that's not a problem."

For one, her steadfast avoidance of preservatives enhances the flavor.

"Taste, that's why we don't use preservatives," she said. "The flavor is more able to come through."

Flavor? Put simply, perhaps only God could make chocolate as succulent as Bellafina. There's a distinct bite to the company's moonshine truffles, a smoothness to its milk chocolate morsels. If heaven's clouds had a taste they