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'Muffin Lady' determined to overcome latest obstacles

By Michael Blankenheim
Times Staff Writer

It was a Tuesday, the first day Westminster's "Muffin Lady" Linda Fisher had permission from her doctor to go back to work after her recent mild heart attack.

Fisher's hair was coiffed, her face bright. She stands only 4 feet 11 inches, but on this day she loomed much larger. That oft-televised personality and drive of hers were set at full volume. Vivacious, Fisher still looked like she was in her late 30s.

Because she believes the welfare system degrades the spirit by destroying self-reliance, she is determined yet again to avoid the welfare rolls, which is what led to her national fame during the last 20 months.

Fisher says she wants to resume her business of selling and baking muffins so she can try to earn a living.

Her Aug. 10 heart attack hospitalized her for four days. Fisher says it was like a giant hand "snuck up behind me and squeezed my chest as hard as possible."

Just before her heart attack, the Carroll County Health Department essentially shut down her business, just as it did in January 1997. In late July, health officials concluded Fisher once again wasn't operating from an inspected commercial kitchen. And depending on how she restarts her business, she may again violate regulations. She hopes to avoid that, but if it happens, the Muffin Lady says so be it.

"What has happened to me can happen to anybody," Fisher says. "It's misleading for us to say how well the economy is doing. There have been fundamental changes in the way people work. People are working longer and getting paid less. They don't have job security. They are working without benefits like health insurance. They are working two jobs. They don't get to spend as much time with their families. Institutions — and I mean governments and businesses — don't treat people right. We've got to stand up to that."

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-- Linda Fisher
The Muffin Lady

The disappearance

On the next day, Wednesday, Fisher spent most of the day in bed or resting on her living room couch.

On Thursday, bowls of fruit-laden muffin batter were never mixed. Looking at Fisher on that day, it didn't seem as if she'd bake muffins anytime soon. The defiant Muffin Lady persona with a reputation for rallying against the bureaucracy wasn't apparent.

Her hair was pinned back. Her face seemed to sag with weariness from the weight of each of her 49 years.

She sat in her living room, surrounded by piles of personal papers and possessions. Bills lay unopened. There were mounds of newspaper and magazine articles and letters from around the world, all about the Muffin Lady. Fisher is trying to organize the clutter that entered her life when she suddenly found herself famous.

That fame included articles in *The Washington Post* and *People* magazine; appearances on "Good Morning America" and CNBC; speaking engagements at universities across the country, plus her book, "The Muffin Lady: Muffins, Cakes and Quick Bread for the Happy Soul," which Fisher says has sold well.

But the financial success that could have come with that fame has eluded her. Fisher says her ex-boyfriend/business manager ended up getting a large chunk of

her \$30,000 in advance money from her book. She says she was devastated last spring when he left her for someone else and when a homeless family she took in stole from her.

Fisher expects to receive royalties from her book in November. She has been able to pay her rent, but she says her finances are strained.

Fisher and her teen-age son still live in the same rent-subsidized Union Street townhouse she was in when the Muffin Lady saga first began. Now, with no income and no health insurance, she says she has reluctantly approached Human Services Programs of Carroll County, Inc. to help her apply for medical assistance.

She says she is still recovering from her heart attack, and her manic depression, or bipolar disorder, is acting up again. She sadly holds up pictures of places she used to live, places with gorgeous gardens she tended and elaborate holiday tables she set.

"My house didn't used to be like this, I used to keep a nice house," she says. "The Muffin Lady is Linda when she's working, and I'm not ready to go back to work yet. Two days ago, I thought I had the energy, but today I don't."

Muffins and welfare

Fisher's story emerged when virtually all levels of American government were struggling with welfare reform. Her tale became easy grist for the national media mill: One hand of government preached work over the public dole, while another shut her business down.

It began in early 1996 when Fisher, with more than 20 years experience as a professional baker, was laid off from her job as a supervisor in a retirement kitchen.

She decided to make extra money by making a few muffins and selling them at local radio station WTTR. Each weekday morning at 2 a.m., she'd bake muffins in her kitchen. She slowly gained more customers.

By early 1997, she was delivering her creations, fresh-baked and stuffed with large pieces of fruit and other goodies, to 22 Westminster businesses on a daily basis. She walked miles for her deliveries, pulling her muffins through Westminster in a red Radio Flyer wagon.

But she was in clear violation of health department regulations requiring food sold commercially be prepared in health-department inspected kitchens with commercial-grade equipment. Health officials ordered her to stop selling muffins and gave her a list of local commercial kitchens she could approach.

Officials at the Westminster volunteer fire department learned of her through local media accounts. They quickly decided she could use their commercial kitchen for free for at least one year.

By February 1997, the Muffin Lady was back in business, and her fame was on a roll as the national media began picking up articles about her from the local press.

Fast forward to this past July.

The Westminster fire department moved to a new headquarters, and Fisher's arrangement with them ended.

She shifted to what she describes as another commercial kitchen, which she won't identify. Health officials learned she had moved her operation, even though she hadn't applied for a new license. After attempting to contact her by certified mail, which was never picked up, and a visit to her house — no one answered the door — the health department informed Fisher's major customer, a local convenience store chain, that the safety of her products couldn't be assured. Her muffins were pulled from the shelves.

Charles Zeleski, the health department's director of environmental health, says his staff wants to work with Fisher to help her resume business. That can happen when Fisher operates from a health department-approved commercial kitchen and pays a \$30 fee for inspectors to come ensure the kitchen is appropriate for her operation, Zeleski says.

"When anybody buys food that is prepared commercially, we want to be able to assure them they are buying a safe product," he says. "Once again, we didn't know under what conditions her products were being prepared."

What will she do?

Fisher says she and her new business manager, a longtime friend who fills that role on an unpaid basis, are searching for a new commercial kitchen. But she bristled about her latest go-around with the health department. "I'm sure Mr. Zeleski wouldn't like it if someone suddenly took three-quarters of his paycheck away."

She tried to calm herself.

"I haven't gone to see them yet to clear this up because I've been angry about it, and my doctor tells me I have to avoid stress."

Her physician, Dr. Jerome Scott, says Fisher experienced minor damage to her heart and stress was possibly a contributing factor. Scott says Fisher is on a number of medications to prevent spasms and blood clots that could lead to more heart damage.

He says her prognosis is good if she stops smoking, has a proper diet, gets exercise, sleeps enough and learns how to manage stress.

"Everybody's got stress; everybody's got bills they can't pay or a child who needs attention," Scott says. "Whether that stress overwhelms us depends upon how we handle what comes down the line."

Fisher says there have been times in the last few months when she's considered trying to get a job as a baker for someone else. But she says that thought leaves her when she considers the larger perspective. She says life in the late '90s demands self-reliance, not dependence on others.

"In the last year, I feel like I've had some treasures laid at my feet, and I also feel like I've been bamboozled," she says. "But the Muffin Lady is who I've become. She's who I am. I've got to finish playing that out."