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Dinner offers bald women solidarity

By Angie Fenton
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Julia Crittendon isn't sure what she'll wear to dinner tonight.

But she knows she'll rock the bald look, which she's been doing for the past year since losing her hair in 2002 to alopecia areata, an autoimmune disease.



By Michael Clevenger, The Courier-Journal

Holly Oyler, left, and Julia Crittendon lost their hair to alopecia areata, an autoimmune disease. Some sufferers wear wigs; others go natural.

"I think it was an empowering thing. I was the one making that choice. It wasn't my alopecia making that choice. I was above it," she said.

Crittendon, 34, is one of several area women who will meet Thea Chassin, founder and president of Bald Girls Do Lunch, tonight for dinner at the Bristol Bar & Grille in the Highlands.

The national group gets women together to support each other and break down taboos surrounding female baldness.

"We educate the world one head at a time," said Chassin, who is based in New York. "We help women feel comfortable and increase public awareness about what alopecia ... is and isn't."

According to the American Academy of Dermatology, alopecia areata causes partial hair loss in nearly 2 percent of the population. It happens when the immune system attacks the hair root for unknown reasons. About 5 percent of those individuals lose all scalp hair (alopecia totalis) or all scalp and body hair (alopecia universalis).

Holly Oyler, 61, is among them.

"When I lost my hair like 35 years ago, I had been in the cosmetics and fashion industry," she said. "The alopecia stripped me down to nothing as far as self-image and self-esteem. It took me probably three years to put my head on straight. That's when I decided I'd change the industry -- and me."

Oyler, of Louisville, created HollyCosmetics.com, a line that she says has been "very successful" with individuals who have alopecia or battle cancer because the "products adhere to a face with no hair."

But deciding how to face hair loss does not necessarily mean covering it up, said Oyler, who doesn't leave home without getting all decked out -- wig and fake eyelashes included.

Then there's "Julia Crittendon, who just waltzes in, in all her glory as her beautiful self," Oyler said. "There's not a pat answer for everybody."

Tonight's dinner will offer options, though, as well as a chance for renewal.

"It's really a time for women like myself to come together and really discuss the issues that go with losing your self-image," Oyler said. "We keep the façade up, but this gives us a chance to break down that façade and really get on the table how we feel and what we've been through."

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