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## Cella Quinn's intelligence worked better than a silver spoon

by Zeph Telpner

Was Cella Quinn born with a silver spoon in her mouth? She has the qualities that make luck happen. She's attractive, projects a strong self-image and is a vice president of the international stock and bond broker, Smith, Barney, Harris, Upham & Co. Inc. Cella speaks often to service clubs and projects the skills of a professional speaker.

Cella has many of the products of success. She drives a bright red 350 SL Mercedes and swims each evening in the pool installed in the living room of her luxurious Omaha house. She carries herself with the bearing of a runway fashion model who improves any clothing that she wears. Cella could attract admiring whistles from those who whistle at lovely women.

And it is all so easy because of Cella's birthright — her silver spoon intelligence. She is one of 55,000 Americans accepted for membership in MENSA, an association of people whose intelligence is higher than that of 98 percent of the population. She also is one of 1,500 members of INTERTEL, an association of persons whose IQs are at or above the 99th percentile of Americans.

Alas, there are no fairy godmothers, and Cella Quinn is no Cinderella, and life is never easy. For Cella, only the ugly duckling lived. Instead of a silver spoon in her mouth, she had a cleft palate, a birth defect which is an opening or split in the roof of the mouth, and a split in the upper lip. The defect often is accompanied by a deformed nose. Cella said her nose "looked like a Quonset hut with a corner that had collapsed."

The crude minimal surgery of the time could not help Cella's speech. To most who listened, her speech was unintelligible. She carried a pencil and a note pad to "talk" with others. She was always in pain. Teeth grew from the sides of her gums and the roof of her mouth. She had cavities. Her teeth ached.

Cella was ugly, and school children aren't kind. They taunted and humiliated her. And she fought back. She was only in third grade when an eighth grade student picked on her. She kicked him into a soprano, and few children bothered her after that.

"When you can't speak," Cella said, "people think you're stupid. My family thought so. The other children thought so, and even I learned to believe it."

Cella decided to leave home. "I just knew," she said, "that whatever happened would be better."

She sold night crawlers and detasseled corn and with her high school graduation gifts, saved \$44. She was 16 when she left home. The town was too small for bus service, so she caught a bus in the next town. "Give me a ticket to the largest city for the cheapest price," she told the bus driver. That city was Lincoln.

Cella Quinn, future stockbroker, corporate officer and INTERTEL member, was broke and ended up at the Lincoln Salvation Army Shelter, where she stood in the food line to serve gravy to indigents in exchange for meals. Later, she would help out on Christmas and other holidays.

She needed a place to live, but when you looked and sounded the way she did and had only \$3, you didn't have many choices. She landed a dishwasher's job at a Walgreen's lunch counter.

She rented a room in a basement. Her landlady was a black prostitute. "She was the first woman that I had ever met who owned property. She even invested in corporate stock," Cella said. "She was kind and she encouraged me to continue my education."

"A dentist ate breakfast each morning at Walgreen's. One day I wrote a note to him about my mouth. 'I can only pay you \$5 a month,' I wrote. He drove me to the University of Nebraska Dental College. I was a wonder for the students. They made the school's first artificial plastic palate for me, and arranged for speech therapy for me."

I could hear the joy in Cella's voice as she relived that moment. "I could talk," she said. "People could understand



Quinn

what I said."

Cella worked her way through business school to become a secretary. She held a secretarial job and in the evenings and weekends cleaned offices and waited tables to save money for further surgery. The cost to fix her mouth and her face was about \$3,000. She was so poor that the first time her medical bills reached \$55 she burst into tears. The university was kind to her and helped to lower the costs.

She paid her medical bills, then worked and saved to attend the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Twelve years passed before she received a degree in journalism and political science. For the next seven years she was a reporter for the Lincoln Journal and the Associated Press.

A magazine ad for trainees for Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith intrigued her. She applied. After she had been with Merrill Lynch for seven years, Smith, Barney recruited her and soon appointed her a sales vice president.

Cella told me she likes to sell because "selling is helping people. My job is to find their financial needs and help them to fulfill those needs."

I asked for an example. "Some clients have been with me since I started in this profession 18 years ago. I have planned with them and have watched as they put their children through college." She paused to reflect upon the past. "They've been able to retire in comfort, buy a second home, fulfill themselves."

"How did you manage to do so far?" I asked. She thought, and then the words tumbled out. "I had low self-esteem." Her voice grew softer. "My self-image was terrible. Still, I had an incredible drive to succeed — so I overlooked my low self-esteem."

She began to talk faster. "I was like a burning engine driven to succeed."

She told me her conversion to success wasn't easy. To improve her self-esteem, she saw a psychiatrist. He told her

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that she was extremely intelligent and urged her to take the MENSA examination. "I didn't believe, before this, that I was smart," she said.

I asked her for advice to those who choose a sales career. "Have the courage to face rejection, but don't let rejection lower your self-esteem. Don't be a hard sell. If you want to help people, you don't hard sell."

"Why the Mercedes and swimming pool?" I asked. "I'm frugal," she said. My Mercedes is eight years old. I may keep it for 10 or 15 years. That's cheaper than trading every three years."

"Maybe so," I said, "but that doesn't explain a swimming pool in the living room."

"Sure it does," she said. "If you get more use from your house, you're being frugal." I started to interrupt, but she continued, quickly. "Most people don't get much use from their living rooms. They use kitchens and rec rooms instead. My husband and I believed that a swimming pool would be more beneficial than a traditional living room. That's part of being frugal."

Cella is taking karate lessons to help organize her above average mental habits, and she enjoys a session of tennis.

Cella Quinn has been her own Prince Charming. She overcame severe physical disabilities, the taunts of classmates, the belief fostered by family, teachers and friends that she was stupid. She overcame wretched and total poverty. She led herself to success.

I have never met anyone quite like her. She appears to have no prejudices, no hates. Everything she told me or that I have read about her gives me the image of a person who likes her clients and cares about their future.

What else can you expect from a poor disfigured woman who served in a Salvation Army food line so that she could eat? Cella, who was encouraged to get more education by a black prostitute, and helped to a better face by a Nebraska dental school — Cella, who worked three and four jobs a day to earn a degree, can hold no grudges, no prejudice.

She views life as a remarkable gift to be lived, and to allow her to help others.