

How *Project Tara* Became Their Diamond Necklace

At one of her monthly girls' nights out, Anita Foster brought up an article in *People* magazine about 13 women who pooled their money to buy a \$37,000 diamond necklace. The women each took four-week turns wearing the 118-diamond necklace, nicknamed "Jewelia." Surprisingly, sharing such a treasure did not cause squabbles among the 13 women — instead it made them feel more energized, sexy and bonded as a group.

The story got eight Wellington girlfriends talking about chipping in to buy a smaller, but "just as glamorous," version of Jewelia. Hadn't they been looking for some fun project that would symbolize and strengthen their friendship? Wouldn't it be fun to wear it to formal galas, on special romantic evenings or even to Paris?

The girls decided it was a great plan and spent a great part of the evening laughing about rules and interesting ways to enjoy face time with the shared bauble. Unfortunately, as often happens with great ideas born of cocktails and late nights, time passed and the necklace idea was pushed aside.

During another night out a few months later, Joanna Boynton relayed the inspiring story of her neighbor's cousin. By anyone's standards, native New Yorker and now full-time Wellington resident Tara Connel hasn't had it easy. After the death of her mother, 24-year-old Tara became the primary caregiver for her grandmother, who was battling Alzheimer's. Tara willingly put her dream of becoming an art teacher on hold and moved into her grandmother's house to provide round-the-clock care.

When her grandmother lost her life in a fall, Tara was invited to Florida by a part of her family she had only recently met. She bravely quit her job and drove her "directionally challenged" self to Wellington. The move, however, wasn't the only change in her life. Through diet and exercise, Tara lost over 140 pounds. Unfortunately, the tremendous weight loss left her with quite a bit of unwanted skin. Although Tara felt better about her appearance, she knew she had a long way to go before she would feel totally comfortable.

As Joanna finished her story, the friends immediately began discussing the possibility of skin-reduction surgery. Each woman understood how improvements in appearance boost one's self-esteem, social life and even career. Soon the women were on the topic of plastic surgery, the latest facial treatments, cosmetic dentistry and a host of makeover marvels. The problem, of course, was that Tara didn't have medical insurance or the financial means for surgery. What to do?

It didn't take long for the group — Karen Cavanagh, Anita Foster, Sue Painter, Linda Herring, Diane Weaver, Anita McSharry, Jill Merrell, Joanna Boynton and B.J. Ewing — to begin strategizing. This group of professionals and business owners

quickly realized that by focusing together on a single project, one deserving woman could receive an extreme makeover. The decision was easy — "Project Tara" would be their diamond necklace. The friends would use their connections to solicit plastic surgeons, dentists, stylists and other community resources

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Front row: Joanna Boynton, Anita Foster, Tara Connel, Anita McSharry and BJ Ewing; back row: Diane Weaver, Jill Merrell, Linda Herring, Karen Cavanagh and Susan Painter.

es to donate to whatever other transformations Tara desired. Each donor would be acknowledged by Project Tara's media partner — *Wellington The Magazine* — which would regularly print progress reports on her unfolding metamorphosis.

"We are great friends," Joanna explained. "We listen to each other; laugh together and most importantly, we help one another. It just made more sense to all of us that our version of the diamond necklace was to reach out as a group and help another woman."

Follow Tara's progress each month in *Wellington The Magazine*. If you would like to offer your services to Project Tara, call Joanna at (561) 795-9156.