

EMPOWERING WOMEN

Live
LOVE
thrive

The title 'Live LOVE thrive' is rendered in a multi-colored, gradient font. 'Live' is in a light blue script. 'LOVE' is in a bold, blocky font with a green-to-blue gradient. 'thrive' is in a blue script font. A female symbol (a circle with a vertical line) is integrated into the 'O' of 'LOVE'. A blue star is positioned above the 'i' in 'thrive', with two curved lines extending upwards from the 'i' to frame it.

**A Compilation of
True Women's Stories
from Adversity to Triumph**

CATHERINE GRAY

Live, Love, Thrive

Inspiring Stories to Empower Women

By Catherine Gray

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DEDICATION

LIVE LOVE THRIVE was inspired by my dear friend Barbara Lentini, who was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2012. After recovering from surgery, Barbara had a great desire to help others by forming healing groups for cancer patients, caregivers, and cancer survivors. She and a few close friends; Annmarie, Linda, Barbara, Ann, Sue and Chrissy- then launched a grassroots group in New York to give people tools to reduce stress and improve the quality of their lives in order to help them heal and thrive from within. Unlike other groups- their approach was one of positivity and hope. They called this group- Live Love Thrive.

Today, Barbara continues to live, love, and thrive in her personal life and continues to inspire me, and others, with her own miraculous journey.

She is truly a woman who exudes 360 Karma. I am proud to call her my friend and dedicate this book to her, and to all the bold women of our 360 Karma community.

Also many thanks to those that help made this book come to fruition. It would not be possible without your help, expertise and belief in this mission- Jennifer Howd, Valerie Madden, Karen Reed, Suzanne Hebert, and my amazing partner Debra Smalley.

And tremendous thanks to all the women featured in this book who have been so bold to share their personal stories of fear and triumph that inspire us all. I am grateful to know all of you! You are making a difference to move us forward on the road to empowerment!

CATHERINE GRAY

IT'S TIME TO EMPOWER WOMEN!

“When an Idea Reaches Critical Mass There is No Stopping the
Shift Its Presence Will Induce.” – **Marianne Williamson**

LIVE, LOVE, THRIVE

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INTRODUCTION- INSPIRING WOMEN TO LIVE LOVE AND THRIVE

What does it take to overcome hardship, inspire, and thrive amidst the difficulties life can throw your way? Why might some women succumb to depression or fall into some deep dark spiritual malady and others find a way to overcome obstacles that are unforeseen?

Many women seem to flourish amidst adversity. What does that look like? How does that energy to overcome take hold? After considering the many stories women have shared with me through my travels, I thought the gathering of women's experiences from those who have overcome significant life challenges, would be a terrific opportunity to show the *light of strength* engendered by other women.

Rumi said, "Moonlight floods the whole sky from horizon to horizon; how much it can fill your room depends on its windows." So, consider this a journey of knocking down walls, clearing out closets and letting the light in of *others* experiences. You are looking through a window into the lives of women who have been willing to share their experience, strength and hope - - with the opportunity to broaden our perspectives on issues that are close to us.

Each story shared is inspiring, insightful, and an opportunity to shed light on the potential of every woman's journey. What is amazing about the women in this book is that there is no one-way. There are multiple ways to cope, multiple ways to interpret life experiences, and by gathering them in one place, it provides a broader perspective. Sharing and reading these insights expands our own experience through what has been possible for another woman.

There is the experience, based in facts, but then there is the perception of that experience, which many times we respond in a way that is most familiar to us. The amazing thing about women, is we are communal, despite our occasional wish to isolate, we like to share our experiences, we also like to flush things out together in an effort to improve ourselves going forward.

There is nothing more powerful than women helping women. Not a single thing. The gratitude I have for what these strong women were willing to share with me, will forever *stay with* me and reside as a part of my being.

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HOLISTIC HEALING TO OVERCOME MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS



Holistic Healing to Overcome Multiple Sclerosis

Ann Boroch Author/Nutritionist

After curing herself of Multiple Sclerosis, Ann Boroch became a C.N.C, naturopath, author, and inspirational speaker. She has been in private practice for over 17 years, helping thousands of people recapture their health and vibrancy, and she is the author of *The Candida Cure: The 90-Day Program to Beat Candida and Restore Vibrant Health*, as well as the award-winning, *Healing Multiple Sclerosis*, and the soon-to-be-released, *The Candida Cure Cookbook*. Ann is passionate about helping people realize the body has an innate intelligence that allows itself to heal. For more information, visit <http://annboroch.com>.

Live Love Thrive is about women overcoming challenges and being triumphant. Your biggest challenges have been health related. Tell me about those.

As a child, I was a sugar addict. I literally rotted out every one of my teeth by the time I was fifteen. My immune system was ravaged from all the sugar I ate, and I was constantly taking antibiotics because I was always sick.

My first serious health crises came at eighteen when I had Epstein-Barr, which led to mononucleosis. Normally, with mono, you sleep and it works itself out in a few months. But, after months of resting, I wasn't getting any better. I'd seen about eight different specialists, tried more than twenty different medications—none of which helped—and then, on top of being sick, my body started becoming debilitated from all the drugs.

Unexpectedly, my mom came across a medical intuitive, who said, “Your daughter has a condition called candida,” which is a yeast fungal overgrowth. We were like, “What’s that?”

Literally a week later, Dr. William Crook’s book *The Yeast Connection* fell into my lap. It had a questionnaire in it that I took that listed every symptom I’d been experiencing. I immediately started crying, feeling relieved that I had an answer. It totally confirmed what the intuitive had said.

Then, once we’d figured out what was going on, I started following an anti-candida diet, which meant no sugar, alcohol, dairy, gluten, or corn. I also took an antifungal medication, Nilstat. And, after about a year of following that protocol, I finally got better.

Does everyone who eats a lot of sugar end up getting candida from it, or does it depend on your body type? What are the variables?

Well, first of all, everybody has candida (yeast) in the body. It mainly lives in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, but it’s everywhere. Men, women, children—we all have it. We’re born with it, and the good bacteria in our system normally keeps it in check.

Unfortunately, there are things that can throw our systems out of balance, like antibiotics, steroids, birth control pills, hormone replacements, chemo, radiation, heavy metals, etcetera. And, when you ingest sugar on top of these things—and that doesn't just include white sugar, but anything that turns into sugar rapidly, such as alcohol, cheese, breads, etcetera—you continually feed yeast. Eventually, single-celled yeast can turn into a fungus.

Candida overgrowth is a silent epidemic. It started off that maybe one out of three people who came to see me had yeast overgrowth. Today, everybody who comes into my office has it; it's just a matter of whether it's mild, moderate, or severe. Severe would be in the form of autoimmune disease or cancer. Unfortunately, there still isn't an accurate test to diagnose it.

What has changed since when you started?

Good question. I'd say we have way more environmental toxicity, largely due to the genetically modified foods we're eating. These foods disrupt the intestinal lining and cause leaky gut along with fungal overgrowth, which both weaken the immune system. For some, chemicals and mycotoxins (fungal byproducts) cross the blood-brain barrier and lead to MS, mental illness, or Parkinson's. For others, these toxins cause eczema, allergies, or arthritis—you name it. And it's not only genetically modified food organisms that have this effect. Gluten does, too. Gluten is a combination of proteins that's found in wheat, barley, and rye. It's put in everything these days: foods, cosmetics, body care products. It's everywhere, and it's compromising our immune systems.

Gluten didn't used to be in everything, but now it is?

Yes, it's been hybridized. They changed the potency of the proteins, and it's become more irritating to the GI tract. We're also eating too much of it. The other problem is, most people who follow gluten-free diets end up eating unhealthy substitutes, filled with corn, sugars,

white rice, yeast, etcetera, which also feed candida.

You have to really educate yourself to know what's best to eat. I teach people to clean up their diets for a period of time—and I'm only talking about ninety days for the average person. In ninety days, you can transform someone's health. You'll feel amazing—and you'll be educated. You'll find a new balance point, which means once or twice a week, you can cheat. You can have your drink, have your dessert, but not every day.

Between nutritional toxicity and deficiency; stress overload; environmental toxins; and infections like yeast, fungus, and bacteria, people are becoming really sick. Cancer is one out of every two people. Diabetes is one out of three. Autoimmune is one out of five. One out of six people over sixty have Alzheimer's.

And clients are not just coming to see me now with one autoimmune condition. They're coming with two or three, cancer included. The key is this: You have to clean up the body's environment long enough to remove inflammation. You need to get rid of yeast overgrowth and fungus, put yeast into balance, and make viruses dormant, which allows the immune system to function properly. When the immune system is balanced, it knows exactly how to heal the body. The body is brilliant. When you cut your finger, it knows what to do. It just takes longer if you have a chronic condition such as MS or cancer. The key is to believe and trust that you can heal; make the choice to get healthy; and find the right practitioner and resources to educate yourself on how to clean up the environment—and do it long enough.

If you don't have your health, you don't have anything in life. You can't do what you're passionate about and what you're here to do. If you ask me what feeds my heart and soul, it's not just getting people healthy, but hearing client stories of how they now have amazing energy to do what they're passionate about.

That's what this book and this movement are about: helping

people find their passion and showing them how to make that happen. People like you are instrumental in that. Like you said, if you don't have your health, then how can you live your life's purpose?

Exactly. I also think we're living in a time where we have to have more accountability. So many of us want the quick fix: the magic herb, the magic drug. It doesn't work that way.

We have to get out of denial and have more awareness and consciousness. The greatest relationship you can ever have is the one with yourself. Healing happens more rapidly when you honor yourself and consciously think about the food you put in your body, the amount of sleep you get each night, how much exercise you do each week, making time to be with family and friends, etcetera.

The most essential step in life is to honor your body and self, which means to nurture and treat yourself with kindness, compassion, patience, and tolerance. And I'm not talking about being perfect; I'm not perfect. But when you consciously make an effort to create a symbiotic relationship with yourself, you're able to find balance, and life not only gets better, it becomes extraordinary.

Right. I always say it's not about being perfect, it's about being happy.

Absolutely, and happiness doesn't come unless you take care of yourself. We look for happiness in other things all the time. That's why people have addictions—but that's not going to give you happiness. And money certainly doesn't buy you happiness. It's what's inside of you. What do you feel? What do you think? Do you wake up with a sense of gratitude? Do you wake up with a sense of creativity and excitement about the world and a feeling that you're connected and supported within it?

You're saying that in order to do that, we have to feel physically, mentally, and emotionally good, right? And that what we eat is impacting all of those things?

You have a spiritual, a physical, and an emotional body. Many people's chemistry is out of balance because what they eat is toxic, and they don't make the connection and understand these habits might be causing their depression or fatigue. They don't understand why they can't stop obsessive thoughts or why they have insomnia. People are depressed and anxious because their body chemistry is off, and they don't know how to change it.

If you start with the basics—getting the GI tract balanced and detoxifying the body—you can then identify what's left to deal with psychologically and usually tackle it yourself or find appropriate help from there. But you need to get your body balanced first. That's the first step.

So it's a balance of taking care of yourself physically by eating the right things, as well as taking care of your emotions—the process of healing doesn't just have one facet?

That's right, it's a balance. And I think that those of us who are more spiritual don't always pay enough attention to the human, carnal body. We need to honor our bodies as much as anything else we do, and I learned all these things the hard way. I have crumbled and cracked many times physiologically and psychologically—that's why I feel insightful to help others. I'm here to show you that you can do it, too. And here's how.

What do you think made the difference for you to be able to make the choice to heal? You were very ill. Some people give into that and remain ill the rest of their lives and just say, "Well, this is my path." You were near death at one point—that's how sick you were. What was the pivotal moment that made you change your path?

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There were a couple pivotal moments. From a young age, I was hardwired with an incredible amount of courage and willpower and tenacity. So, when I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age twenty-four and was told I was going to be in a wheelchair and have to take chemotherapy, I was like, 'There's no way in hell my life's over! I was petrified. But I looked at my mom and I said, "If I take the chemo, I'm going to die. I'm too fragile." I had already been a guinea, taking excessive medications in the past, and I knew chemo would kill me. I said to her, "I don't know what I'm going to do, but let's go an alternative route." She amazingly supported me in that decision.

I think the real pinnacle moment came when I attempted suicide. I was living in a halfway house at the time, and I didn't know how to get out of the pain and the suffering I was in. I didn't see a solution. All I had were the clothes on my back. I had no money. I hadn't spoken to God, Tao, universe—whatever you want to call it—for months because I'd felt betrayed. I knew I had a great heart but didn't understand why I had to go through all of this. I literally said out loud to God, "You know, I might be really screwed up right now, but I don't deserve this treatment anymore."

It sounds simple, but in that very moment, I realized my worth was based on my existence. If I was in a carnal body, then I was worthy. It didn't matter how much money I had, whether Mommy/Daddy loved me, whether I'd beat MS or not. The fact that I existed on this plane was enough to know that I was worthy and that everything else I did in life was gravy.

When I made that realization, it was like my DNA changed in an instant. I was out of the halfway house in two and a half weeks. I saw a healer who used hypnosis to help me get rid of a lot of phobic energy I was carrying and helped me restore health and balance in my life. After that, I never looked back. In hindsight, I realized I needed to go through all that pain and suffering so I could be a healer and do what I do now.

What support system did you have that helped keep you moving in the right direction?

I didn't have much support at all, actually, which is why I was so fragile. I had catastrophic thinking all the time. I believed I could heal, but I didn't know how to get out of my own way. When you basically lie on a couch and you can't breathe, swallow, or move properly for six months, it's petrifying. I really had a hard time. I didn't know how to distract myself. Something higher than me said, "Keep going." My support system was my mother and a friend—and that was about it. I felt very isolated.

One thing I try to offer people is to find support because I felt so isolated. I was blindly walking through the valleys hoping I would get to the other side. It was an incredibly dark time, but it made me realize that for every ounce of darkness you could ever experience, there are many ways to find the light at the end of the tunnel. You need to be tenacious. And you need to ask for support. Then you need to open your heart to receive it, and you need to honor yourself to be able to trust it when it comes.

Do you think that when the answers arrive, it's a matter of listening to them? It's like a kind of download?

Well, it's not just listening. You really do have to open up to receive them. And part of that process of receiving is honoring yourself.

I was one of those people who could never trust. But I eventually learned that to be able to trust—whether it's trusting other people, or trusting what I felt—I had to honor myself. It always comes back to our relationships with ourselves. If you don't work through your mommy/daddy stuff, if you don't look at the patterns that are toxic to you and sweep them under the carpet, then you're not honoring what you've been through in your life—and you're going to have a very bumpy ride, feeling like a victim most of the time.

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The way you get in the driver's seat is to realize that all of that trauma is what it is. No one's alone. We all have pain. We've all had suffering. We've all had trauma. That's what you have to realize: that you're not alone, despite how you might feel.

So the first step is realizing you're not alone. The second step is accepting that whatever is just is. And the third step is giving it permission to leave and realizing you can take wisdom from those experiences—and that you don't need to be attached to the emotional weight of them anymore.

We all have things we've been through that have been tough, but I always find there's a lesson in these things that can help us move to a new and better place. We need to be willing, however, to see the lesson and then take that information, utilize it, and implement it. I don't believe tough things happen for naught. I believe they happen to help us grow. Would you agree?

I think there's not one trauma or tragedy in my life that wasn't an opportunity. Don't get me wrong, I certainly couldn't have said that when I was in the middle of them. I kicked and screamed, for sure. But I can tell you that when I got to the other side, I had incredible hindsight. As a healer, I download my experiences to the public immediately because that's who I am. I'm a vessel to share what I've been through and then give it out to the world.

One other thing that's really important to be able to make the types of changes we're talking about is to question your beliefs. What you believe comes from the subconscious, and the subconscious affects your central nervous system, and your central nervous system controls every cell, tissue, and organ in your body.

If you have hang-ups about money, ask yourself some questions: "Is this a hand-me-down from my parents?" Many people say money's the root of all evil. Do you really believe that? Check it out. Question it.

See where it came from. Maybe it's an old belief that doesn't fit anymore. And when you change it, you might just find prosperity in your life.

If you have been diagnosed with a so-called “incurable” disease, try challenging that notion. Maybe you need to see what the body can do so you can change that belief to say, “The body is brilliant and knows how to heal; I now believe I can heal.” That doesn't mean your body heals instantly. It means you do the due diligence to make better choices to eat properly, exercise, get enough sleep, etcetera, to get the body balanced.

Beliefs aren't laws written in stone. They're tools, and this is the place to start when you feel stuck in an area of your life, whether it's in relationships, love, business, money, or your health. Examine your beliefs and create new beliefs—and then uphold these new beliefs with affirmations, thoughts, and actions until they become your new beliefs. That's how you make magic happen in life. That's how you can turn everything in your life around for the better.

That's how we really do create our own life.

Correct. Some people don't want that much power, and that's sad. I don't judge them. I don't judge anyone, but we have free will and choice, and that's what makes us so magical. Use that, harness it, embrace it. Sure, life is far from perfect and, unfortunately, the soul needs to have fear and pain at times to be able to grow. The key is to learn great tools along the way so you can utilize them to help move through the fear and the pain more quickly.

What I hear you saying is that what you say and what you think are important, but you also need to back these up with actions, such as eating right or exercising, or doing whatever it is you need to do to honor and take care of yourself.

Right. It can't just be a lot of talk. You've got to walk it.

You've got to walk it, absolutely! So what do you think has been necessary for you to sustain your triumphant place in life?

Consciousness is key. And putting myself first on the list each day, which means as soon as I get up, I meditate for ten to fifteen minutes. I do my affirmations each day when I'm walking the dog or taking a shower. I shield myself energetically before I do my work because I'm an intuitive. I make sure I eat healthy. I take vitamins that keep me whole and balanced. I make sure I laugh every day, and I make sure I have wonderful, supportive people around me.

All great advice, for sure. And speaking of great advice, when did you decide to write your first book?

The idea came when I was living in Taos, New Mexico, at the age of thirty. My first book, *Healing Multiple Sclerosis*, came out in 2007.

And you wrote it because you were able to heal yourself and wanted to help other people do the same?

Absolutely. But that book's not just for people with MS. That book's helpful for anybody with an autoimmune condition or chronic disease. It not only explains physiologically what happens to the body, but psychologically what happens, and it gives you the solutions.

And your second book was *The Candida Cure*, correct?

Yes. It's a ninety-day program that helps you look at your body as a whole, and it's not about deprivation. You can think of it more as a process of removing infection and inflammation, which addresses candida blood sugar and adrenal imbalances, and detoxifies the elimination organs. After thirty days, you start to feel great. In ninety days, you feel amazing. Then you're educated. After that, you can indulge once or twice a week. But you'll have a new vantage point—a new consciousness. You're not going to want to eat and indulge in the same

junk that you used to, because when you reclaim your energy and your mental clarity, you won't want to lose it again.

So this book is for everyone who wants to stay healthy, not just people who have candida?

Today we're all so toxic because of GMO and processed foods along with environmental toxins and stress. My program is a kind of reset button that gives you a conscious understanding about how to stay more balanced in your life.

And now you have a third book; it's a cookbook, right?

Yes. It's called *The Candida Cure Cookbook*. I collaborated with Alison Charbonneau, who's an incredible chef. She put together sugar-free, dairy-free, gluten-free, and yeast-free recipes that are amazing. People think that on an anti-candida diet, you can't have bread—but we have breads. They think you can't have dessert—but we have desserts. I'm so excited about this book. And I've put my heart and soul into laying everything out so thoroughly that, between the three books I've written, no one would ever need to step a foot into my office for my services.

Tell me a couple of success stories of people you've helped through your books.

I had a case of someone dealing with scleroderma, which is an autoimmune disease in which the body basically turns into stone. After twenty years of having the disease, it turned completely around.

Another woman contacted me who'd been wheelchair-bound with MS. Recently, she went on a trip with her husband for their anniversary and went zip-lining. She even sent me a video of it—it's incredible.

And I'll tell you another really cool story. I had a woman in Spain who found my book. She'd been in a wheelchair for fifteen years from MS, did my program, and is now out of the wheelchair, taking up to one hundred, two hundred steps a day. She's so inspired that she contacted me and asked if she could start a candida support group on Facebook. That support group is now helping other people who are doing my program.

Oh, I love that. I also have a friend whom you've helped. She was diagnosed with MS, and they told her she'd be in a wheelchair if she didn't take the pharmaceuticals. Well, she didn't take the pharmaceuticals and did your program instead. And now she's dancing and walking, and it's amazing. I'm amazed at your work—I think it's game-changing.

Thank you. But I do want to say there are no guarantees, and there are no quick fixes. The reality is that I'm helping support, coach, and guide people to get educated on the steps they need to take to clean up their environments and get their bodies well. It's a process.

It's so great to see you living your life's purpose with the gifts you were given. I know it hasn't been an easy road, and I think it's important for people to really grasp that what you've been through to get to the point of being able to help other people has not been easy. I think a lot of people don't tap into their gifts, so they suffer. Maybe they suffer their whole lives with an illness without realizing they have gifts to give. But, in order to give those gifts, they must be healthy. It sounds like we actually have a choice of whether to be healthy or not. Would you be so bold as to say it's a choice?

When clients come in to see me, that's exactly what I say. Health is a choice. What do you want to choose? That's where consciousness comes into play. People need to be aware of what they think about. It affects their health. On average, most people spend 70 percent of their

daily thoughts on negative, fear-based emotions and patterns. It suppresses their immune systems.

So we've got to pay attention and then make choices from there. Everything's about choice and free will. That's the beauty. From there it's about intention. Follow intention with action, and magic happens.

Absolutely. I was going to ask your advice for someone who's looking to find her life's purpose, but that's really it.

Yes. It's about honoring yourself, tuning into yourself, and giving yourself permission to be kind enough and gentle enough to take the time to find what you're passionate about. I have many clients who come to me saying, "I have no clue what I want to do in life." I ask, "Have you tried an art class? Have you tried this or that?"

A lot of people get so angry at themselves during the process of exploring their interests that they end up quitting before they can figure anything out. That's not helping anyone. Do your best to open yourself up to receive the tools, the gifts, the people, places, and things that can help you—and keep experimenting until you find what you connect with.

Sometimes I think people have to quiet themselves because there's so much chatter and so many distractions.

I totally agree. I think slowing down is essential, and that doesn't mean you have to do a formal meditation where you're still and completely silent. You might be the person who likes to go onto YouTube and do guided meditations. You might find quieting yourself means hiking with your dogs in the mountains. You might find slowing down means doing tai chi because movement and breath work shows you how to start to tune into yourself.

If you find yourself running ragged and you're feeling busy and distracted all the time, then you're definitely in a place of denial. And it's

because you're afraid to get into who you are. There are so many tools out there to explore: Emotional freedom technique—love that technique. Hypnosis. Affirmations. Meditation. Prayer. There are so many tools available today to help you tackle fears and neutralize them. It's a matter of mustering up the courage to try them.

And it's so worth moving through fear, because the other side of it is just so beautiful, right? Walking through fear, and tapping into your life's purpose and sharing it with others, brings so much joy and peace. What you put out is what comes back, and it's that simple. That's what we're talking about in this book—that's 360 karma.

Absolutely. Feel love and give love, and find your passion so you can give it back to the world. That's it. If you do those things, you've done it correctly.

Amen! You're an inspiration.

Thank you. So are you!

Anything we haven't covered?

I think we went around the world and back.

I think we did, my friend!

CATHERINE GRAY

FACE FORWARD FOUNDER DEBORAH ALESSI -
REBOUNDED FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



CEO/Founder of Face Forward, Inc.

Deborah Alessi

As CEO and Founder of Face Forward, Inc., Deborah's mission is to provide pro-bono physical and emotional reconstruction for women, children, and men who have been victimized by domestic violence, human trafficking and other crimes.

A survivor of domestic violence, herself, Deborah advocates tirelessly for an end to this crime and for hope and healing for its victims. She holds an advanced degree in business management from Glasgow University and began her career in procuring and managing private aircraft for a range of clients, including the Royal Family of Bahrain.

www.FaceForwardLA.org

Everybody faces challenges in their lives, and a pivotal one for you was the loss of your dad when you were just seven years old. How did that affect your life?

My life changed overnight when my father passed. My dad was probably the better parent—he was more calm and more Zen. He was someone my brother and I really looked up to.

My mother had her issues, and I've come to realize my father acted as a filter from her to us. So, when he was gone, there was suddenly no filter anymore. We were in complete shock. Our whole family environment changed—everything changed. I went from seven to seventeen overnight.

I think that happens to a lot of people when they lose a parent so young—they're forced to grow up more quickly. Was that your experience?

Yes. You have to be in survival mode. And when you don't have a mother who's maternal, you have to learn how to be strong and get through situations on your own—to be your own parent, really.

Did you have any sort of support system at that point?

Not really. My brother and I are close today, but back then, we were all just trying to get through it. And there was a ten-year age gap between my brother and I, so he dealt with it in other ways. He didn't want to be home around my mother. For him, it was like, we can't live with her, which for me, caused a lot of insecurities, a lot of anxiety.

What developed as a result of that situation, that unexpected loss?

Well, I made a lot of mistakes. And I didn't really discover that until I was in my early thirties. I wouldn't let anyone get close to me, especially a man. And if I did, I'd always pick men that I knew I'd never marry.

Why do you think you didn't let men get close to you? Was it because you were afraid of losing them?

The first man who told me I was beautiful and that he loved me abandoned me. So, unconsciously, I think I was afraid, yes. When you're a child, you can't separate someone dying versus someone leaving you. They're the same in the eyes of a child.

Do you think you had a hard time choosing people to be in relationships with because of this?

Yes. It was just one disaster after the next. And then one day, an older lady who's kind of a role model for me said, "You need to go talk to someone about some of the things in your past." And it kind of started the ball rolling for me.

I always had a boyfriend. I never wanted to be alone. But then I went through a stage when I was healing myself and I went like a year without dating.

Did your therapist suggest that—to take that time and just put the focus on yourself?

Yes, to heal myself, and to heal the wounds I'd been carrying from childhood.

You've been in relationships with emotionally abusive people. I'm wondering why someone who's gone through the loss you've

experienced would seek that type of relationship.

When you lose a parent and then you have another parent that doesn't give you a lot of love, you don't have a lot of self-worth. So you generally date people who don't give you respect—or you date people who you try to fix because you just don't feel worthy.

So if you notice this type of pattern in your relationships, it might be a good idea to get therapy or maybe join a support group that helps build your self-esteem?

Absolutely, but it might be a bit of a process, so be prepared for that. It wasn't just like I went to therapy and everything was great. Being European, therapy isn't a big thing for us. But I tried five or six different therapists before I found someone who was the right fit. The woman who I finally found and was really comfortable with ended up being like a mother figure for me. She was international, and she had traveled, so she understood my culture. She understood me.

Would you say building self-esteem is an essential part of learning to love yourself? They say you can't really allow somebody else to love you until you love yourself.

Yes, absolutely; learn to love yourself and your flaws, which is exactly what I did. After that, I met my husband.

That's so great. How long after you did all this work and started feeling good about yourself did you meet your husband?

Probably three or four years. I had another relationship, and it was fine. But then I met my husband and I kept going down the path of getting better. I felt a difference in myself, and I knew what I wanted in a partner.

Once you took down those walls, I bet it felt great.

Yeah, it feels great, even today. Our marriage, and our love, grows stronger every day. He's my best friend.

That's so wonderful. And what I love is the common cause you two created. Face Forward is an organization that helps victims of physical domestic violence who can't afford reconstructive surgery. I know you had the original idea to start the organization, and your husband, Dr. David Alessi, is a surgeon. What a great partnership.

Yes, we basically help women rebuild their faces, and we also provide therapy. It's for victims of domestic violence, and also for victims of human trafficking.

So this is for very, very severe situations . . .

Yes, it is. We've had a few simple cases, rebuilding cheekbones or eye sockets and things like that. But most of our patients need ten surgeries.

Ten surgeries? Wow. And how does the reconstructive surgery you provide these women impact their lives?

It's incredible. One of our patients came here from Uganda. Her husband, who was a professor at a major university there, attacked her with acid. And her face was . . . I mean, she essentially didn't have a face, and she was also partially blind. We gave her back her sight, and we did like fifteen surgeries. Now she's attending a university back east and is getting a master's degree.

Every one of our patients must go on to do amazing things. It's not like we're going to give someone \$60,000 in pro bono surgeries and they're going to stay at home and watch Oprah all day. Our patients must go out there, spread the word, talk about domestic violence, change their lives, change their careers . . . We don't want them to use their disfigurement as an excuse that they can't do anything, or they can't move on. So part of the agreement with Face Forward is that they must go on to do amazing things with their lives. And I'm definitely on each one. If I don't hear from them for a while, or they're not doing something great, I'm on their case.

I love that, and it's exactly what 360 Karma is about. You give to them, and they give back. And you've given so much.

This year we did over \$750,000 in pro bono surgeries.

And every year, you have a gala with various celebrities who attend and are also part of the program to raise money.

Absolutely. Lana Parrilla from Once Upon a Time just raised \$60,000 in T-shirt sales—in a week and a half. And then we did an event at the Laugh Factory and we raised another \$10,000 there. We do events throughout the year to keep the money coming in.

That's great. And if people wanted to give to your organization, they can do it at faceforwardla.org?

Yes, that's right.

You help women who've been in domestic violence and human trafficking situations. So what advice do you have for women who

might be in those situations now?

I think the first thing you have to do is acknowledge that you're in that situation, because a lot of women or men will pretend it's normal. Maybe they've gone through a childhood where one of their parents was abusive so they just think this is the way things are—it's not how things are in healthy relationships. So, acknowledgement—knowing you're in that situation and that it's not your fault—that's number one.

So the first step is admitting it or acknowledging it?

Yes. And then find a person who you feel safe telling your story to and who can help you set a plan. Because you have to have a plan—you can't just get out. When you're in an abusive relationship, you've got to have somewhere to go that's safe because the abuser might try to come after you and find you.

What's an example of a plan that might be helpful?

If your abuser is extremely violent, be in touch with a shelter or a safe house, so when there's a violent situation that comes up, they can help you get out of your home. If you have children, find out if they can accommodate your kids. But you have to be extremely careful. Most of our patients were disfigured when they left. So you need a plan, you need to find a safe place. That's the priority.

Have any of your patients said that that they wished they'd done something differently?

Yes, that they'd left sooner, because the more you're in it, the more you think, It's my fault. If only I'd made dinner at 5:15 instead of 5:20, he wouldn't be this way. He said he hit me because I made him angry again.

It's not just someone hitting you that's abusive, it's also the brainwashing—the emotional abuse. You start believing what you're being told: that you're worthless, that it's your fault. Nobody should ever have to go through any of that.

No, they definitely shouldn't. Now Face Forward is also helping victims of human trafficking. That's something new for your organization, correct?

Yes. We just started this year.

Tell me a little bit about that.

An ex-LAPD officer who runs a human trafficking nonprofit contacted us to say she'd love to send some ladies our way. And I said, "You know, we could open the door to that." Our first patient was a girl who was trafficked at the age of eleven.

She's in a safe house right now in a different area of the country because [her trafficker] is still trying to kill her, even though he's in prison. She was basically in a basement having to sleep with a hundred people a day, beaten to a pulp. She was told when to go to the bathroom, and when to eat. She would have to work like twenty-two hours straight, and had no escape, absolutely none. And, on top of all that, every time she was sold, she was branded with a new tattoo on her neck—each pimp had a code that was branded on her neck.

And this is being done to a lot of women?

Very much so. I think the cartel used to mainly traffic drugs. Now they're mainly trafficking children.

In our community, as women helping women, we have to figure out ways to help these women who are being trafficked.

It's awful; it's absolutely awful. This patient was raped by her mother when she was four. And her mother was a very educated woman. So I think people get the wrong idea, like this girl comes from the ghetto. No, this little girl's mom was a lawyer. A doctor eventually found that her genitals had been physically damaged, and they put her in foster care. She was in fifty-two foster care homes.

My goodness. I don't know how someone survives that. Did Face Forward help with her reconstruction?

Yes. We removed the tattoos. One of her pimps also tried to scalp her and she had very little hair left. So we got her hair extensions and did a makeover on her.

Face Forward helps with physical reconstruction. Are there other nonprofits that help with the therapeutic part of the process?

We can do both. But with human trafficking, there are several pieces of the jigsaw, with different nonprofits coming together to help one person. When you've only ever been told what to do, when to eat, when to pee, when to take a shower, you have no thought process of your own. So we're the physical part.

Then it's about learning to be a human being again, learning to know what your self-worth is, learning to know how to make decisions for yourself. It takes a long process to get all that back. It takes a couple years . . .

What advice would you give readers who are thinking, Oh my God, this is horrific that this is going on. How can I help women in these

situations?

Join a nonprofit; become a board member, committee member, volunteer. Social media is a big thing for us. We do campaigns, and we post a lot of articles about human trafficking, things that have happened recently, or about celebrities or football players who have beaten their wives. The more we get it out there, the more we create awareness. There are so many different ways to get involved.

It must be so rewarding to you and your husband when you witness these women having this surgery, feeling good about themselves, and getting back into the workforce or getting back into life. I think giving back makes people happy; would you say giving back the way you do with Face Forward brings you a lot of happiness?

Absolutely. It's changed my life and it's made me a better person.

You've clearly found your life's purpose. What advice do you have for women reading this interview who are searching for their life's purpose?

Face your fears. And do whatever makes you scared. Because I think we can bury everything under the covers and pretend like it's all hunky-dory, which I did for years. But if you face your fears, sure, it opens up a whole can of worms and it might be scary, but you end up blossoming like a rose. And you just might find out what your life's purpose is during the process. That's what happened to me, at least.

You made peace with the past, and ended up creating a new present and future . . . I wish you all the luck. I'm so grateful for people like you who are doing such amazing work in the world.

LIVE, LOVE, THRIVE

Thank you, Catherine. Thank you so much.

CATHERINE GRAY

VICTORY OVER RACISM AND FOSTER ABUSE



**President, The L-Project/Los Angeles Health & Fitness
Entrepreneur/Civil Rights Advocate/ U.S. Navy Veteran**

Christina Baldwin

A U.S. Navy veteran with over 20 years of experience in the Health & Fitness industry, Christina developed the first patent in over 100 years for a newly designed punching bag. She is the founder of mobile fitness company, B*Rock*Fit, and her A-team client roster includes Olympic gold medalists Audley Harrison and Natasha Mayers, among many others.

Dedicated to civil rights, Christina also serves as president of The L-Project, an organization founded to raise awareness about the effects of LGBT bullying, to give hope to those suffering from it, and to raise money to help combat it.

You have a very interesting background. Let's start with your childhood—did you face many challenges growing up?

My childhood was a bit challenging, for sure. Back in 1961, when I was born, blacks and whites couldn't marry. My mom was an Italian woman from Strongsville, Ohio. And, on my birth certificate, it says my dad was white—but it's obviously not true, I'm biracial.

My mom decided that as my brother and I got older, we'd probably get a little darker, and it wouldn't be possible for her to keep us. So my brother and I were put in foster homes. This black woman named Mrs. Green and her husband fostered us, but the woman was very mean. She tortured us.

She tortured you? In what way?

She would lock me in this little two-foot-tall crawl space in the attic if I did something she didn't like. She'd literally drag me up the stairs, throw me into the attic, and lock me in there for hours and hours.

She did all sorts of hateful things. One time I asked for a second helping of spaghetti at dinner, and she made me eat the whole pot of spaghetti; sometimes she'd make me eat dog food off the floor. And she used to whip my brother and me with this huge extension cord. She was just evil.

My God. How were you able to get out of there?

An incident that happened to my brother got us out of that house. We were called to dinner one night. The way the house was built, the bathroom was adjacent to the kitchen, so you could open the door from the bathroom and walk right into the kitchen.

My brother, who was tiny for his age, was standing on his tiptoes trying to wash his hands in the bathroom sink. Our foster mom opened the door from the kitchen and saw him struggling, trying to get his hands underneath the faucet.

She reached out, grabbed both of his hands, turned off the cold water, and turned on the hot water completely, like, now you're seeing steam coming up. And she just held his hands underneath the hot water until his skin blistered and bubbled up. He was screaming at the top of his lungs. I can still hear those blood-curdling screams of distress to this day.

When the social worker visited us and saw the burns to the back of my brother's hands, she made arrangements to get us out of that house quickly. Within the next week, they moved us, and we were taken in by another couple that ended up adopting us.

And were they kind?

Yes, they were kind. The Baldwins were nice people. However, my adopted mom and I butted heads all the time. She and I are both strong-willed people, but they gave us everything we could ever ask for.

I can imagine you were strong-headed because of what you'd been through in the first household; it must have been a survival mechanism. How do you think going through everything you endured as a child affected you?

I definitely had abandonment issues. My adopted mom's sisters lived in Dayton, Ohio, and I loved going down to Dayton to visit everyone. But when it was time to leave, I'd cry and cry. I didn't really know why at the time. But now I understand it was because of my fear of abandonment.

Then, when I got into high school, I probably still had some of those abandonment issues. But joining the military is what kind of erased them. You make relationships in the military and then you have to move on, so you're forced to figure out how to keep moving forward.

I consider myself to be whole now. I've done work to repair the damage that was done when I was a kid. I've replaced the shame with honor, and I've resolved my abandonment issues by strengthening my sense of commitment and loyalty to others. I've worked my way into becoming a whole person—that's who I am today.

What do you think was a pivotal moment for you that helped you get over the abandonment and mistreatment of your childhood? Was it when you went into the military?

The military was a start, for sure. But let's backtrack. When my brother and I were taken in by the Baldwins, my mother was Lutheran and my dad was a Southern Baptist. They decided to let my brother and me pick which religion we wanted to practice.

My dad took us to his church one Sunday, and my mom took us to her church on the following Sunday. Well, at my dad's church, the congregation was very loud. They were dancing, clapping, and speaking in tongues. My brother and I were looking at each other and cracking up like, Oh My goodness! These people are crazy! They were singing, jumping and clapping with their wigs flying off, and praising the Lord.

My mom's church was just the opposite: conservative and quiet. We liked conservative and quiet. So we ended up choosing my mom's church.

But by the time I got to seventh grade, I started having questions about God and why there's only one group of people chosen in the bible; these things just didn't make sense to me. I had always been attracted to

women—I think I was five or six when it started—but I knew it conflicted with this religion thing.

Then, as I went into the military, layers of religious indoctrination started falling away. The military brought me to Hawaii, and, by this time in my life, I had started searching for my own path.

I met a woman who was into the Hare Krishna movement; I met her at Pat's, one of the only lesbian bars on Oahu. She turned me on to metaphysical things like Edward Cayce and Ruth Montgomery, and a book called Messages from Michael.

I'd made a lot of money, but I didn't want to be materialistic. So I decided to break free and do what the monks do. I just started giving stuff away and kept a handful of my possessions. I was homeless for two weeks on the beach at one point. I didn't have a place to stay because I was in transition, trying to leave Oahu to come to Los Angeles.

Then I had this “aha” moment on the beach one night. I was in a weird state of sleep where I thought I was dreaming, but I really wasn't, and I heard someone having a conversation. The last few words were, “I will be with you.” Then I woke up.

I didn't think it was God or Jesus talking to me. It was more like somebody I knew had been talking to me—that's what it felt like. From that day forward, my life changed.

Before then, I used to have dreams that I was going to go to hell because I'm a lesbian. And I used to think God hated me. But then I had that experience on the beach and I suddenly realized that I'm a good person, that I'm going to be okay no matter what. Once that shift happened, I felt like I became whole.

You had an epiphany that the religion you grew up with wasn't the

end-all, be-all, and there was a pivotal shift within you when you said, “Okay, there’s something greater than myself. And I’m okay the way I am.” That’s amazing. So what was the next step for you?

The next step was Los Angeles. About a week later, I got on a plane with just the things on my back and I came to LA. I stayed in LA for a few months working in a friend’s deli and making some money. I had just been discharged from the Navy, so I was trying to figure out where I wanted to live.

When did you begin bodybuilding?

I began bodybuilding and power lifting in the Navy. Bodybuilding was a way for me to exercise, be strong, and be fit. But then I was working at my friend’s deli and one of my best friends from Hawaii, who was living at an Air Force base in Altus, Oklahoma, called me up and invited me to visit her and hang out.

So I jumped on a bus and headed to Altus, Oklahoma. The next thing you know, I’m living in Altus, Oklahoma. It was definitely an eye-opening experience. I ended up working on the base, in the gym. I was training people, and I eventually became the athletic director. I actually started out as a volunteer.

You started bodybuilding for yourself, but then you loved it so much you started training people?

Yeah, exactly. I designed a weight-loss program for the Altus Air Force base. In the Air Force back then, if you were overweight, they were serious about kicking you out. So they sent people to us who were overweight, for six or eight weeks. We kicked their butts so they could go back to the commanders to weigh in and hopefully stay in the military. I did that for about a year.

You developed a program for the military?

I developed a program for those members stationed on the base at the time, yes. It's kind of like the CrossFit stuff they do now. We made them run then stop at a station and do push-ups, then run and stop at another station and do something else. It was intensive interval training.

What was your next step from there?

Then I traveled to DC, hung out with my military buddies, and ended up getting a job at a fitness center in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. I wound up becoming the manager of that little club. After I left there, I went to Jersey City to hang out with some more military friends and ended up working for Gold's Gym.

The military really affected your life, allowing you to travel to all these cities where your military friends were living. What made you decide to join the military in the first place?

I didn't want to go to college, but my adopted mom basically said I needed to if I was going to live under their roof. So I went to Kent State for a college tour, saw all the partying going on, and was like, Oh my God, if I come here, I'm going to flunk out . . . I didn't want that to happen so I told my parents I needed to make my own money and do my own thing.

That's when I went down to the recruiting station. The recruiter had me take the ASVAB test—the military's vocational aptitude test. And once I took the test, he just looked at me and said, "Here." He handed me the book of all the jobs in the military and said, "Pick something."

What did you pick?

A cryptologic technician. I helped establish secure air-to-ground, ship-to-shore communications for our naval fleet and reconnaissance squadrons. I made sure our computer systems and equipment were working. I was the youngest member of our team, and the only black female.

I was eighteen years old and stationed in Spain, and the crew that took care of me in Spain was awesome. It wasn't until I got to Puerto Rico that I encountered any real difficulties. The captain of that base was anti-gay. His son was gay, and he was on a personal mission to get gay people out of the military. He tried really hard to get me discharged.

Thankfully, things have changed since then and people can be openly gay in the military now. Were you open about being gay then?

Let's say I wasn't hiding it. I played volleyball and softball for the Navy. And NIS—Naval Investigative Service—sat me down one day, handed me a pen and a pad of paper, and said, "You're on an all-girls softball team; list all the gay women." I just looked at them like they were crazy and told them I didn't know what they were talking about.

Wow, that's crazy—it was like McCarthyism.

Yes, It was awful. The only way they could really catch us is if they went to the gay bar and caught us kissing women and got pictures. This was twenty years ago, and back then, that was all they needed to do. They tried, but they never got any pictures.

It's so crazy how much things have changed for gay people in twenty years, but it's also crazy to know what it was like only twenty years ago.

Yes, it's really crazy to look back at that now. We've come a long way since then.

Let's switch gears for a bit. You were in a severe car accident after you got out of the military. Can you talk a little about that?

Sure. I was living in New Jersey in '93, and we had a bunch of snowstorms in one week. I went outside to drive to work—I was working for FedEx back then and had to get to the airport—but my truck was covered in snow. It was so covered with snow that I could barely get into it. And then, when I finally did, the truck wouldn't start. So I called the girl I was dating at the time and asked her if she could give me a ride.

She comes over and picks me up. We get on the highway. I tell her the exit's coming up and we need to get over to the right-hand lane.

She starts moving over but then, all of a sudden, we start fishtailing across four lanes of highway, skidding all over the place. I turn my head back to try and see if there are other cars coming, and when I turn back to look out the front window, I see there's nothing but a huge concrete wall in front of us.

Within a split second, the car hits the embankment and we go flying. The car veers away from the wall to the left and smacks dead center into a tree. My girlfriend hits her head on the steering wheel, and all I hear is the hissing of the radiator. I can't breathe. The seat belt's locked and I'm trapped. I don't know it yet, but all my ribs are broken on the left side.

A guy who saw the accident comes over to the driver's side window to check on us, and I ask him to cut the seatbelt loose for me. He reaches across the driver's side and begins to cut the strap across my chest. Once the seatbelt is cut, he attempts to get the door open, but it's not budging. I'm not certain how he called the paramedics, but after they arrived, they

immediately started using the Jaws of Life to extract me from the vehicle.

The passenger door finally comes off, and one of the rescue guys comes over and kneels down next to me, grabs my hand, and says, “Hey, I need you to stay awake.” He starts asking me questions, and I just want to go to sleep. And he’s like, “No, no, you need to stay awake.” I can hear the other guys swearing as they’re trying to get me out of the car, and I’m having flashbacks to the military. I’m like, They sound just like the guys I worked with in the Navy.

They’re drilling and pulling and yanking, and then they finally get the roof off the car, pull me out, and put me in the ambulance to take me to the trauma center.

Three days later, I woke up from a coma. I was in the hospital for about two and a half weeks. They told me I actually died on the table a couple times.

Wow, what an incredible story. Did that near-death experience change your life in any way?

Yeah, “no fear” became my motto after that. I had it tattooed on my arm in Mandarin after I recovered from the accident.

When we have adversities and challenges, it’s like we have to make a choice: Are they going to take us down? Or are they going to make us stronger? It seems like each one of your challenges has made you stronger. Would you say that’s true?

Yes, absolutely. That accident put me out of work for a year, but I didn’t let it stop me. As soon as I was healthy enough to go back to work, I transferred from Jersey to California, and I took a job at the ramp at the San José airport. I was one of only a few females on a ramp with seventy

guys. But I worked my way up to ramp manager two years later. I was managing all those guys; it was very cool. They were one of the best groups I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

Between working with computers in the military, working at the airport on the ramp, and what you're doing now—training male boxers—it seems like you've done a lot of things that are typically known to be male-oriented. You're a trailblazing woman.

Yes, I guess you could say that!

And you've had many different types of jobs as well. I've noticed a common theme among entrepreneurs is that they tend to have several types of jobs before they start their own business. Where do you think you got that? Is it from your adoptive parents?

It probably did come from my adoptive parents. My dad worked two or three jobs, and my mom was also an entrepreneur. She was an LPN, a licensed practical nurse. And she had a side business where she would help get other nurses gigs—it was a call service in an office she created downstairs in our home.

Your parents acted as role models of sorts—how great that you ended up following in their footsteps! Let's talk about the next step on your road to becoming an entrepreneur.

After working in gyms off and on for over twenty years, I decided to do my own thing. I had philosophical issues as a trainer working in a sales environment: The sales side of the fitness business can be a bit of a snake pit.

For me, training is about making a commitment to changing your life. If you're not ready to make that commitment, I don't want to

pressure you into it. But if you're working in a gym, you're expected to pressure people into making that commitment right then and there. It just wasn't my thing, so I branched out on my own.

You recently came up with an idea for a new punching bag design, which I think is just so cool. There hasn't been a new style of punching bag in over a hundred years. Tell me a little bit about that.

I met a guy from Quest Training who came by the boxing gym one day. He was holding a head-shaped training tool in his hand, and it had a handle on the inside of the head. I knew it was an MMA-type thing that they used as a target for kicking or punching. I made a couple of suggestions to him on how he could improve the head for boxing coaches, and we ended up exchanging contact information.

A week later, I sketched out a design with a skull and sent it to him. He thought it was great, and they ended up offering me a licensing deal. But we couldn't agree on terms, so I declined their offer and chose to do it on my own. After that, I hired a patent attorney, and we started working together on submitting a design patent.

That's so great. Do you have the patent on it, or is it pending?

It's pending. It's been a year and we haven't heard any bad news, so I'm taking that as good news. I'm working on a few other ideas now. I'd really like to design workout equipment specifically for women.

I have a client who lives in Beverly Hills, and she recently moved into a new building. They have a nice gym facility. But she's very petite, and the machines are too wide. Everything is so big—even the dumbbells, they're huge. So I'm starting with designing smaller equipment that women can buy for their homes, and then I'd like to

work with a manufacturer to scale down some of their equipment for women.

You're obviously very passionate about what you're doing, and it's something that's needed in the world. What would you say to other women about inspiring them to live their life's purpose, like you're doing?

I think in order to find your life's purpose, you have to start by working on yourself. You have to spend time understanding who you are, what drives you, and what your passion is—and you're not going to do that unless you sit down and spend some serious time with yourself.

If I didn't take that time to work on my abandonment issues, to work on healing myself from the trauma that I experienced as a kid, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing right now. I would have found an excuse not to do it; I would have let fear stop me from doing what I've set out to do.

So I say work on yourself. You have to. I don't think you can be a complete person unless you understand this.

Then find other people who have similar thought patterns and spend your time with them. I've had to cut a lot of people out of my life because they weren't really traveling the path that I'm traveling. I don't have any problem cutting people off who aren't positive forces in my life. I can love you from a distance.

Do you feel happy today?

I do. I can honestly say I'm happy every day because I live in the here and now. Sure, I try to plan for the future, but because of that near-fatal accident I was in, I know that I can't plan for the future. You can step out and boom—next thing you know you're in the hospital, laid up

in intensive care, or dead.

I appreciate every moment, and I try to make sure the people around me know that I love them and I care about them, and that's not just lip service. It's through deliberate effort.

How would you say you give back?

I always like to give back to my community through my volunteer work. I served as a volunteer at the Greenlight Giving Foundation—that's Keith Ferrazzi's charitable foundation in Santa Monica. I'm a former board member of the NIA Collective, an African American lesbian organization in Oakland. I've worked on LGBT campaigns for marriage equality. I've protested in the streets for social justice in the black community, as well as for LGBT and women's rights.

Now I'm the president of the L Project in Los Angeles. We're working hard to empower our community through art and technology. We're trying to build an online training academy at the L Project called the LOLA Academy. I think more women need to be in tech, and I'd like to create a platform where women who are already in the tech field can share their knowledge.

That's wonderful—so you're connecting people to help them help each other.

Right, and it's specifically for lesbians. We're starting in LA, but we want it to expand on a national level in the months to come.

You're an amazing woman, Chris. I'm so glad to have met you.

Thank you—and right back at you!

CONQUERING BECOMING A WOMAN BORN IN A MALE BODY



Corporate Executive: Conquering Becoming a Woman Born in a Male Body

Jessica Bair

Jessica Bair was born and raised in Utah, the eldest of five children in a Mormon family. Assigned male at birth, Jessica's gender identity has always been female and her sexual orientation, lesbian.

By age 35, Jessica had accomplished all of her goals in life—except to be truly happy. Choosing life over suicide, she shed her fear, came out as a lesbian, granted an amicable divorce to her first spouse (and still best friend and co-parent); and fulfilled her dream of living and loving as her authentic self, transforming her body to match her gender identity in less than one year.

After coming out, Jessica has held several LGBT leadership positions, including serving as HRC Los Angeles Steering Committee Co-Chair.

She has also served on the HRC Board of Governors and Executive Committee, as well as on the Outfest Board of Directors.

Jessica currently works in cybersecurity as senior manager of business development in the Cisco Security Business Group—Advanced Threats Solutions/Threat Grid. In 2001, she co-created the EnCase Certified Examiner (EnCE), the most widely held computer forensic certification in the World, and in 2009, she created the EnCase Certified eDiscovery Practitioner (EnCEP) program.

Graduating at the top of her class and inducted into the Beta Sigma Gamma International Business Honor Society, Jessica holds a Master of Business Administration degree, with an emphasis in strategic planning and ethical leadership from Pepperdine University, as well as a Bachelor of Science degree in public administration from Roger Williams University.

I'm so happy that I have this opportunity to talk with you, Jessica. I think there are so many people out there who'll relate to your story and find it helpful and inspiring. Thank you for being here.

It's my honor.

I'd like to jump in with learning about some of the pivotal moments that helped shape who you are today. What challenges did you face early on in life?

Well, I was born in Utah. I was raised Mormon. I was the only blonde-headed kid in the neighborhood. So right there, if you were different, then that was a focal point for bullying.

You were bullied for being blonde?

Yes, just the fact that I had blonde hair and nobody else did. In my neighborhood, I realized very quickly that I had to be strong and that I had to present a strong persona in order to have people not mess with me because, beyond the blonde hair, I could tell from a young age I was different. I was assigned male at birth. I've always been attracted to girls. But, inside, I've always felt that I was a woman.

This was beyond challenging for me, because The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a whole culture—it's not just a religion. They have very strong expectations, and I was the oldest child in my family so I was expected to go down a certain pathway that was set out for me from when I was born.

The viewpoint of the Church is that your whole purpose in life is to gain a physical body and to control desires; to serve other people; and to live a life of service and obedience—and then find an eternal companion, have kids, and create a family that continues on forever. To deviate from that, you're walking away from your potential as an intelligent life form to become like God.

That's a lot of responsibility. And not conforming to that was very traumatic for me. I experienced a lot of guilt at a very young age. I first thought about killing myself when I was seven years old.

I ended up coming out to my mom when I was thirteen, but she put me right back in the closet. She wanted me to talk to ecclesiastical leaders and doctors to “fix” me.

Then, when I started going through puberty, my breasts started to develop. That was really exciting, and also scary. I got a lot of ridicule for that, as you can imagine. That's when I finally came out to my dad, but he pushed me back into the closet, too.

I planned to go into the military to prove I could overcome my body, and I actually had both my senator's and congressman's

nominations to West Point. I also had an ROTC early scholarship, but I decided to take a full-tuition scholarship to George Washington University instead.

Before leaving for college, I had had a conversion to the Book of Mormon on my own: reading it, praying about it, and believing that it's true. I also got what's called a patriarchal blessing, where you're given guidance and direction in your life. It's kind of like a road map for your specific mission.

I felt a lot of pressure from home—and spiritually—to go on a mission and also to try to see if there might be a way to “fix” myself. So I ended up giving up my scholarship to George Washington after my first year and went home for two years. I'd been studying international affairs and taking Latin and Hebrew, but I was sent to Florida for my mission, of all places.

What was it like for you feeling so different on the inside than what the world saw on the outside?

My three brothers are all six-foot-one to six-foot-three. I'm five-foot-nine. I'm tall for a woman, but short for my family. My toes are the same as my mom's. I've got small hands. I was caught in the middle my whole life. Being smaller, I was more like my sister.

And being gifted mentally, I realized education was the way I could have a purpose in life that wasn't about physicality. I just wanted the world to see me how I saw myself—not in the mirror, but what I saw as I was looking out from my eyes. What I saw from the inside.

I started dressing in women's clothing when I was very young, borrowing my sister's clothes and my mom's clothes. I got caught when I was thirteen, and that's when I came out to my mom. She was very upset. She said, “You don't want to be a woman; it's terrible being a woman.

We don't get all the privileges men get. We're second-class citizens."

I told her, "That's who I am. I've known this since I was four years old." But she was adamant. She refused to accept it.

You were born in a male body, but as a woman who loves women. Do you identify as a lesbian?

Yes, I identify as a lesbian. Gender identity is who you are, and I identify as a woman. Sexual orientation is who you love. I love women.

What was the pivotal moment when you said, "I have to be true to myself?"

When I stopped living for my mom. Fast-forward to age thirty-five, when I had accomplished every goal in life, except being happy. I was a senior director in a public corporation, in line to be vice president. I was graduating at the top of my class for my MBA. I had served in the military as a special agent. I had a family with four beautiful children, a wife who loved me, a huge home—everything. I was the third-ranked leader in my local Mormon congregation, but I just wanted to die.

You had everything, but you weren't happy . . .

Yes. There was nothing left to accomplish. I could make more money and buy a nicer car, but I knew I'd never be happy. I considered what was better, to be true to myself and be an embarrassment to my family, or to just kill myself? Which is less of a sin to God? In the Mormon Church, suicide is actually considered better.

Statistics show that about a quarter of LGBT Mormons kill themselves. Half the kids on the street in Utah are LGBT Latter-day

Saints that got kicked out of their homes. It's a really big problem. This whole thing just came out that if you're in a same-sex marriage, you're apostate, and you'll get thrown out of the church—just like people who murder or rape.

To give you more perspective, my mom totally disowned me when I came out to her again. I took my parents on a family vacation after graduating at the top of my MBA class, and then my wife and I sat my mom down and said, “This is who I am, and I’m going to have to either be who I am or die. So I’m choosing to be who I am.” My mom was not happy at all.

After my mother disowned me, one of my brothers, my sister, and all my extended family disowned me, too. One brother, to an extent, has come around. Another brother I stay close to, but it was kind of rocky with him for a while as well. Two of my brothers cheated on their wives and got excommunicated, and they’re still in the family circle.

I tried to explain to my family that I never felt closer to God than when I came out to myself, when I accepted myself, when I accepted my path in life and that God loved me. There were many times during my transition period, and then through the healing process afterward, when I was alone because my family had left me. I didn’t have a large group of friends at that time. Most of my time was alone. It was God and myself. And I didn’t feel condemned. I didn’t feel that I was on my way to hell. I felt loved and inspired and grateful.

Do you communicate with your family now?

I have a really close relationship with each of my four children. They bring me so much joy. I am best friends with my ex-wife, and we co-parent with joint custody, though the kids live with her and her husband in Utah most of the time. I maintained a home near them for six years, while living primarily in California, to have a safe place to spend time

together. Now that they're older, they prefer to fly to California, so I sold the other house. We have an amazing time together as a family, and my new wife, Natalia, is a great stepmom and host to the kids.

And I've texted with my dad a couple of times. When we were at a family reunion for my eldest son's coming home from his mission in June 2015, I got a chance to talk to my dad. It was my birthday as well, and I hadn't talked to him in quite a while. It was very friendly. He told me that he loves me and he got to meet Natalia—he was really enamored of her. I got to talk to a brother and sister whom I hadn't talked to in seven years. And my youngest brother gave me a hug and told my wife, "Welcome to the family."

Let me ask you this: Are you happier now that you're being true to yourself? And, if so, do you think that sense of happiness is stronger than the sadness you feel at having lost contact with some of your family members?

Oh, my gosh, I'm so much happier being true to myself. And sure, there are some feelings of loss and remorse. But when you're planning on being dead and then you choose life, fear disappears. I have no fear now. I have no fear at work, I have no fear with church, I have no fear with society, or politics, or people, or relationships, or anything. I lost all fear and guilt, which has allowed me to be completely myself—to be completely free—and happy.

I also receive a tremendous amount of joy from helping other people accelerate their journey to being their true selves. I want to help people get past their fear points and any guilt they might be harboring so they can come into their own and can truly blossom.

You're living your truth, and it's so inspiring. What about work? What do you do, and what was it like for you to come out there?

I'm in cyber security and, before I came out, I'd been promoted to vice president of a public corporation. They had a nondiscrimination policy against sexual orientation, and I put together a package using the resources from the Human Rights Campaign, anonymously laying out the reasons why they should update their policy to include gender identity and expression. The package highlighted other Fortune 500 companies that had done this already, and it explained why they should do it, too. It gave resources on how to handle the policy update, and it explained why it's good business to do it.

I finished my first quarter as a VP and had my quarterly business review with the CEO and CFO, where we totally kicked butt, and I had scheduled a meeting with the vice president of human resources immediately after. She thought it was about personnel changes; the first part of the meeting was about my hiring more people. But, when we finished that part of the meeting, I said, "By the way, you got that nondiscrimination package about adding gender identity and expression four months ago. That was from me. And this is who I am." She was like, "Wow, I'm so happy for you, congratulations. Let's do it."

Wow. They just loved you and respected you so much that they just accepted it.

Yeah, she put it in the policy. The CEO was angry, though. He and the guy I replaced were like, "Why didn't you tell us before you took the job?" I said, "Why, would it matter? You knew I could do the job; that's why you hired me. And I'm doing it. And this shouldn't matter." They were both like, "Errr."

Do you think they would have promoted you if they had known?

I don't think they would have, no. That's the flat truth. I don't work for them anymore, but I love that company. They were very supportive

overall. They called a company meeting, and the CEO introduced me and said, “You guys all know this person, and when she comes back, she’ll be Jessica. And we’re all going to support her.” I also received a very nice card from the founder of the company telling me he was looking forward to meeting JB 2.0 . . . really nice geek humor.

How long was your transition?

Usually the process is about three to four years, but I did it in eleven months. I granted my first wife a divorce. I had a spreadsheet, I had a plan, I was very aggressive. They normally have certain gatekeepers so that people don’t make a mistake that they’ll regret. They say, “Go get counseling for a year.” And they want you to dress up in the clothes of your identified gender for a year at work, and then they’ll maybe put you on hormones.

However, as soon as I had chosen not to die and was willing to give up my family, my religion, my society, my eternity, possibly my work—everything in order to be true—I told them to get out of my way. I went out and found the best surgeons in the world who would do informed consent. It was life or death for me. It was either do this or die trying.

Do you have a support system that you’ve created for yourself in the community?

I moved to West Hollywood back in 2008 not knowing anybody. I didn’t know a single person, so I just got involved in the Human Rights Campaign and started meeting people that way.

Seven months after joining the Human Rights Campaign, I was elected to be the co-chair for all of LA. Ten months later, I was elected to the National Board of Governors and I served there for four years. I’ve

been on the dinner committee for five as the table captain co-chair. I'm also very involved in the Los Angeles LGBT Center, and I just joined the Board of Directors for Outfest.

It sounds like you came to a city that really embraced and supported you.

Yes. I saw *The L Word* and I was amazed. I immediately thought, That's where I want to live. *The L Word* helped save my life. That was the first time I'd ever seen people I actually identified with in the media. A lesbian who is strong, powerful, intelligent, involved, and I'd never seen that depicted until I saw *The L Word*. I was like, Oh, my gosh—that's who I am, that's who I've always been inside!

Did you identify with the transgender character?

No, I identified with the strong women characters. To that point, as I shared with you, I started developing breasts when I was going through puberty. I didn't absorb much androgen, so I developed smaller hands and smaller features. I had both male and female parts, but I wasn't intersex.

I was caught between having a mind of a woman and a body that was mostly male. But I've always felt like a woman, so I was in a transgender state for the first thirty years of my life. However, when my transition was complete, I was no longer between genders. I identified as a woman, not as a transgendered person.

Other people have their own viewpoints. I've had a lot of friends who are in the trans community, this umbrella group that includes people from cross-dressers to transsexuals, and gender-queer, and gender non-conforming, and non-binary. Different people are on different paths. They have the right to identify as they do. But, to be clear, I do not

identify as transgender. I am a woman without qualifiers.

Thank you for that; your explanation is helpful because people don't always understand the varying factors. So, today you are a woman, and that's how you meet and greet people?

It's on my birth certificate, driver's license, social security card, passport, anatomy, everything. I've done fine-art nude modeling. I am a woman. I'm glad to educate people on this.

It's amazing how media really does impact us. Back when I made a film about gay marriage, I said to myself, "There are two things that are going to make a real difference to gay people. One is that we see ourselves on TV, and the other is that we gain the right to get married." I'm so happy that both of these things have happened in full force over the past decade. It's interesting how The L Word had that big of an impact on you.

The media is a way to share empathy. That's how we can understand our own lives, from seeing other people and their stories. Media helps us identify, as well as have empathy for, other people whose shoes we'll never walk in.

It's not necessarily that some people hate people who are LGBT—it's that they have fear. And I think empathy is the antithesis of fear. So, when you lose fear, you gain a lot of compassion and love. Really, fear is what I help to fight every day. It's how I can truly serve other people. I've lived my life; I could die at any time. I've had a very joyful life, so now I live every day to serve other people.

I love that. It sounds as though you've found your life's purpose. What is your advice to other people about living their life's purpose,

how to find it, and how to manifest it?

I saw this great quote that said, “Be yourself. The world will adjust.” I share that with people all the time. We all try to live our lives for other people, and we always fail in the end.

However long it takes to fail will be how long it takes for you to finally break, or a better path is to finally lose the guilt from society or religion or the people who supposedly love you. Once you lose that guilt—and the fear that comes with it—then you can be yourself. And you know what? The world will continue on. The planets will revolve. It’s all going to be fine. The world will move on, and you’ll be happier. If you’re happier, then your life is going to be amazing, and you’ll be able to share more of it with other people. That’s my philosophy: Live your life for yourself.

It’s not about being selfish or hurtful or controlling or anything else like that. In order for you to be able to give back to society, and to really be engaged and fully in a relationship, whether it’s with work or with society or family or whatever it might be—If you’re not true to yourself, then you’re not going to be wholly there and give all you can. You’re always going to be feeling bad. You’re always going to be holding back.

In the end, the right people will love you. All I ever wanted was to have the opportunity to love truly as I am, and to be loved for who I am. That’s it, that’s all I ever wanted in life. Everything else is gravy. And I have that. That’s why I’m so happy and blessed.

Accept yourself, be yourself. Be you. Live for yourself. The world will be okay, and you will be okay. It’ll get better. That’s my philosophy.

I think you’re right. I think that all anybody wants is to love and to be loved, and I love your advice to be true to yourself. Amen.

It'll all be okay. You'll be happier, and so will everybody else around you.

Thank you so much, Jessica.

You're so welcome.

CATHERINE GRAY

6

ON STARTING OVER TO LAUNCH MID-LIFE
MUSIC CAREER



Founder & President, IPK LLC/Musician

Karen Reed

An eclectically talented powerhouse who holds a second degree black belt in Taekwondo, Karen is the founder and president of IPK LLC, a user experience design and strategy group with such high-profile clients as: Marvel Entertainment, Focus Features, Sony Pictures and PBS, among many others. In addition to her work at IPK, Karen is also currently spearheading the launch of a national holiday known as “National Singles Day” and is a published singer/songwriter and accomplished performer who has traveled extensively. Dedicated to giving back, Karen has volunteered on house-building projects for Habitat for Humanity in India and home-building projects in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. For more information, visit Karen’s websites: <http://karenreed.com>, <http://ipk.com>

It’s a beautiful day to be talking with you, Karen, and I’d love to

dive in by taking a trip down memory lane. I've been talking with women about challenges they've faced and how they've overcome them, so I'm wondering what kind of challenges you faced early on in life that impacted where you are today?

I guess you could say I had a relatively “normal” small-town Ohio upbringing. But, ever since I was a little kid, I was a rule breaker, always looking for a way to do things differently. I remember negotiating with my mom when I started kindergarten: “Do I really have to go every day? It’s the same thing every single day. Surely I can just go Monday, Wednesday, Friday; or Tuesday, Thursday . . .” Of course, I lost that one, but you get the idea.

And I was constantly getting in trouble in kindergarten for things like not wanting to take naps at naptime and not wanting to play “Ring Around the Rosie”—it all just seemed so contrived and unnecessary. I’d get in trouble for taking shortcuts when writing out the alphabet, and at playtime, I wanted to play with the trucks, building blocks, and hammers and tools, but was told they were for boys only. Girls could play with dolls and dishes.

It’s interesting how when we were growing up, things were so defined between boys and girls: These are girl’s things. These are boy’s things.

Things have changed a lot since then, but yeah, back in the mid-sixties, there was a hard line between what was okay for boys versus what was okay for girls. Most people just went along with it, but I was raised in a family that was a little more forward-thinking. I had three younger siblings, two of them brothers, and our household was pretty much an equal-opportunity free-for-all when it came to who played with what. Both my parents were educated and liberal-minded and supported us as individuals, allowing us to “think differently.” But it did result in hitting these walls of “what’s okay at home doesn’t seem to be okay at school.”

We'd spent a year in Philadelphia, on my dad's sabbatical, and they'd just started letting girls wear jeans to school—a very unusual thing back then. It was 1970 and a super-exciting change for all us girls! When my family returned to Ohio, my parents put me into St. Mary's, our local Catholic school. We weren't Catholic, but St. Mary's had gotten great reviews and had just begun accepting lay students. My parents enrolled my brother and me; we were the first two lay students to attend.

Thankfully, St. Mary's had progressed beyond the wearing of school uniforms, but their dress code was still old-school. Girls wore skirts or dresses, and boys wore pants.

I was there for three years, sixth through eighth grade, and by the time I left girls were not only wearing pants, we were wearing jeans! I lobbied hard to make this happen, dragging my parents into the principal's office as witnesses to my declaration: "I spent a year in Philadelphia wearing jeans to school every day, and it didn't hurt anybody!"

I also helped change the girls' recess requirements. When I got there, the girls played red rover every single day. Meanwhile, the guys were running around playing flag football, tag, and basically doing whatever they wanted on the same playground. By the time I left, girls were allowed to play kickball and Wiffle ball as well as red rover.

You lobbied for all that?

I sure did! It made no sense to me that this school was still holding onto all these outdated "girls' rules." My second year there, they announced there would be no phys ed classes for girls because they didn't have a female lay teacher on staff that year to teach it. Beyond horrified at the prospect of no gym class, I jumped up and said, "My mom will do it!"

Did she?

Yes! Initially, she was doubtful, saying, “I don’t know anything about running a phys ed class.” But I convinced her, saying, “It’s okay, I’ll tell you everything you need to know, Mom. It’s really simple. We can just play Wiffle ball or kickball—they’re like baseball.” After my mom ran the class for a year, they hired a new female lay teacher and she was able to take over.

When I look back on it now, that was some pretty radical stuff for an eleven-year-old to take on. But it seemed natural at the time, and I felt really strongly about equal opportunity for girls at school.

Tying this back to your question about the challenges I’ve faced, it’s not like I’ve had to overcome the types of adversity that come to mind when you first think of people overcoming something huge in their lives. But when you find yourself in a situation where you’re constantly being restricted—and you’re seeing the need for change and wanting to make improvements—then, by definition, you’re facing a type of adversity. It’s called swimming upstream. And it’s a perpetual effort.

People overcome challenges in different ways. And swimming upstream is definitely a challenge. The girls couldn’t have gym class, and you lobbied for that. They couldn’t wear pants, and you lobbied for that, too. Making cultural change is trailblazing, especially for a young kid.

I arrived at this new school and was experiencing what felt like arbitrary and unfair restrictions. I couldn’t run around at recess, couldn’t wear pants . . . I had just spent a year being able to do these things freely in another location—why not here? It just didn’t make any sense to me—it was actually really simple.

This way of seeing things clearly seems pivotal to who you are and how you've been able to shape your life. Can you pinpoint a pivotal moment for you that happened in college?

Settling on a major was pivotal for me. I'd taken a year off out of high school; I was very rebellious and didn't want to go through more years of school. But after a year in the "real world," I reconsidered, albeit without a real game plan.

I was a natural in art and drawing, but being a rebel, I chose a dual major in anthropology and literature; I was fascinated by both fields. I got straight A's. I loved it. But, approaching my third year, I began to wonder what kind of career I was headed into—it wasn't completely clear to me and the classes were getting more and more involved. So, at that point, I decided to step away and take another look at graphic design.

I was accepted into the program, but pursuing it meant starting over as a freshman in a five-year Bachelor of Science in Design program. I decided to go for it, and everything came together for me in that program: My natural skill sets fit perfectly, and I could picture it leading to a solid post-graduate career.

It's always nice when you find your gift and your passion, and you get to do it.

Indeed. And it's worth holding out for, or in this case, redirecting for. Some people, including my own father, ridiculed my decision since it meant starting over in my fourth year and graduating three years later than my peers, but it worked out perfectly for me, as I knew it would. I'm so glad I listened to the wisdom in my own heart and not to the fears of others.

What were your next steps once you had that under your belt?

I had interned in New York City for four years and was offered a job there, but I'd always wanted to see what it'd be like to live on the West Coast. I knew if I was going to try it, I'd better do it right away, because once my student loan payments started kicking in, I might not have the same kind of freedom.

So I got in a car with a friend and drove to Los Angeles. I really didn't know anybody or where I was going to end up. Long story short, I had fifty dollars to my name and a friend of a friend said, "You can stay in this apartment in Van Nuys for a month. I'll be back after that; then you gotta move out."

That's how I started my life in Los Angeles. I was really looking at a blank slate and asking myself, what's next? The skills and resume that I had built doing internships back East didn't really seem to translate to the LA market, with its focus on the entertainment industry. I'd been doing mostly corporate identity work and branding for firms that were known in New York, but not as recognized in Los Angeles.

The LA market was also very competitive, and I found myself coming up empty on interview after interview. I finally scrambled and took a production position at The Hollywood Reporter, pasting up ads. It wasn't the most exciting job, but it got me going, and it got me meeting people. I'd go to parties and when I told people I worked at The Hollywood Reporter, they were immediately impressed. It was silly, the job was nothing to be amazed by, but the name carried a huge cachet.

I ended up using that leverage to take myself to the next level and land a job at one of LA's then-top entertainment advertising design firms. It was more production work, but it taught me all about making movie posters and designing titles, logos, and high-end brochures. They offered me a full-time position, but I didn't want to commit to a production career after seven years in college getting my design degree.

At the same time, my best friend, also a designer, convinced me it

was time to make the leap and go for a design job. He said, “You can’t be a production artist who’s a designer. And you can’t be a designer who’s a production artist. No one will ever take you seriously in either camp. You need to make a decision and go with it.”

So, I cold-turkeyed the production and started telling people I was now only working in design. Everybody pretty much said, “Oh, that’s too bad, we loved working with you, you were great,” and then hung up. But then, finally, someone said, “Great, we’re looking for a designer, come on in.” That started my design career, and I never looked back.

I think a lot of people get so stuck in doing something that they don’t really want to be doing because they’re good at it and are well known for it. But they’re afraid to take that leap of doing what they really want to do. That was very bold to give up that security to go for what you really wanted.

I think it’s not so much about being bold, but just going for it. Once you step out and declare, even just to yourself, what your intention is, the world kind of shifts and starts to move ever so slightly in your direction—sometimes a lot in your direction. It’s so important to do that, and perseverance plays a big part.

At first it was just thinking, What if I did this? or What if I did that? I just sort of jumped off cliffs not knowing what was going to happen. But, once I had a few successes when I jumped off a cliff, I could see how things just kind of worked out. So I began to have faith in jumping off cliffs. I began to just know that that’s the way.

To just walk through the fear and keep going?

Yes, exactly. When you’re reaching for your dreams and trying to achieve goals that are beyond what you’ve been accustomed to in your

day-to-day life, you leave that little bubble called your comfort zone.

And, when you're out of your comfort zone, it doesn't feel so good. There's just something within you that's going to feel unsettled. But you have to get used to hanging out there in that strange space that has no tether to it—the place that doesn't feel super comfortable—if you want to achieve something new.

The next big leap was starting your own business, right?

Yes. I didn't actually set out to start my own business; initially I just wanted to get into interactive design. The internet was just coming into everyone's awareness at the time and no one, including me, seemed to know much about it. But it was clear that designing for interactive media was about to become a “thing,” and I wanted to be part of it.

I left my art director's job of the last seven years to start out on this new, unknown journey. I'd seen an article in the LA Times featuring the first movie studio website, Universal's CyberWalk, a play on their CityWalk retail enterprise. In the article, they interviewed the president of a new website development company, Digital Planet. The company was based in LA, so I tracked down the owner, Josh Greer, and met him in his apartment in North Hollywood, which he was running the business out of at the time.

When I explained my interest and background in design and the entertainment industry, he said, “We're primarily programmers; we need what you have. Come back and meet our new creative director, and we'll see how it goes.”

These guys were all geeks in their mid-twenties, and here I was a graphic designer, female, and in my mid-thirties. It wasn't going to be a shoo-in by any means. But the creative director was “encouraged by [my] enthusiasm” and agreed to try me out.

The first few days I did nothing but scan 35mm slides into a desktop computer. Do you know how long it had been since I'd spent a day making scans? I'd been an art director for years at that point.

But that illustrates another important thing: You can't go into uncharted territory with an aura of entitlement. You've got to do what's asked of you and be okay with it. It was an exercise in humility for me, but I was happy to do it. I was going to be best served by watching, listening, paying attention, and being as helpful as I possibly could. And that's what I did.

I wasn't online at home at the time, so I'd come to their offices at 7:00 a.m., when their programmers arrived, just to be able to surf the net on their web servers. If I was going to help them design for the internet, I needed to be able to feel it, drive it, test it out, understand the environment we were designing for. They were very gracious to let me do that.

One week, when our creative director was out on vacation and the company needed some quick solutions for a new movie website they'd just landed, I got to do a few design mockups. I could tell the producer's expectations were not high, but when he saw them, his response was, "These are great! I love them all. Keep doing whatever you're doing. Here's a list of everything we need." I ended up designing the graphics for the entire site, which turned out to be one of the very first movie websites. It was 1995, and the internet was about to burst onto everyone's radar.

After that, the company started to grow like crazy; they were one of the only web developers in Los Angeles at the time and the film industry was turning to them for all its projects. My job was freelance and I'd finally gotten online at home, so I was allowed to work remotely. We had a great working relationship, and they started feeding me all their non-film-related business. I did the first websites for NutraSweet, Spencer's, and Fender Musical Instruments, as well as ongoing work on many of Digital Planet's slate of movie websites.

One day I got a call from a woman I used to work with back in my graphic design days. She had started her own business, and one of her clients was a technology provider for the computers that ran the teller windows at credit unions. They were looking for someone to help them develop websites for their credit union clients, and she'd told them, "My friend Karen is getting into that; let me hook you guys up." The connection was a good one for both sides, and when that tech company went on to pitch their first big bank, a full website, and online banking project, they called me in to co-pitch the design and branding. We got it.

That turned out to be the biggest job I'd ever won—and it enabled me to hire a few people, get an office, and start to grow my freelance work into an official business. That was 1996.

This was new territory for me, but I had a unique advantage that I wasn't completely aware of at the time: good business sense. In the design world, creative people tend to be really good at the creative thing: brainstorming ideas, thinking outside the box, and making beautiful artwork. But they're often not as good with the business side of things: time management, planning, heading up meetings . . .

Being able to function and "do a little bit of everything" on both the creative and the business sides turned out to be crucial in the success of my new business. Everything I learned about running a business, I learned on the job and from my experience working for others. But nothing quite prepares you for the reality of being in charge of an office and a staff for the very first time.

In the beginning, when it was just me, I'd have my doubts and think, Who am I to be out here talking to these big companies? I'd have to stop and coach myself back into the game: You've been an art director in the entertainment industry for ten years now. You have a BS in graphic design. You know how to get things done. You've just spent the last year doing a ton of great things with this new internet company. You're in the perfect spot to do this. You have all the qualifications. They don't need

to know you're working from your dining room.

I used the word “we” a lot. “We do this; we will do that.” Even if I didn't have a “we” right at that moment, I knew at some point I would, so why not go ahead and say it now? And that made a really big difference. It let my clients know they weren't just hiring one person. It also made me feel more confident when I spoke. And when a potential client is convinced of your capabilities and believes in you, you're able to catapult up the ladder relatively quickly.

How did you continue to evolve your company?

We were fortunate to have great word of mouth, and most of my clients came from referrals by other clients—mostly entertainment companies and financial institutions. Three years into it, business was great, and I was about to expand my office and staff to fill an additional 2,000 square feet with ten more people. The phone rang and it was Sky Dayton, founder of EarthLink, an earlier client, with a proposition to come on board as head of product development at eCompanies, an e-business incubator he was launching with Jake Winebaum of Disney's Buena Vista Internet. They wanted to hire me as an SVP with a contract, salary, and stock options.

It certainly sounded like a great opportunity and a generous offer—and to be honest, the idea of someone else being in charge of payroll sounded like heaven to me at the time—but I couldn't simply walk out on a business I'd just spent three and a half years building from nothing. We'd lived through our growing pains to become a well-oiled machine with a roster of big-name clients, and a dozen or so staff I'd essentially hand-trained.

The conversation went back and forth for a few weeks. They were very persistent, and as I learned more about their vision for eCompanies, I made a pitch of my own: Why not bring in my entire team?

Entrepreneurs themselves, Sky and Jake understood where I was coming from. Why outsource development for all these e-business startups when we could develop them much quicker and cheaper in-house with my fully up-and-running design team?

It wasn't easy and negotiations went on for weeks, finally culminating in me standing my ground in a conference room with two very powerful, successful, and determined men. But, after an intense couple of hours, we reached a consensus and shook hands. The deal was done.

I learned so much through that process, probably the biggest and most important takeaway being to ask for what you want and believe is fair. You will never know if you never ask. The worst that can happen is a firm no. And even then, you'll have closure in knowing you went for it and didn't sell yourself short.

What's so empowering is that, through the sometimes scary process of sticking your neck out and asking for what you want, you're also training yourself. Each time you enter that space, you're also entering the space of recognizing and honoring your value. And every time you do that, even on a small scale, you become better and better at it. There's no doubt in my mind that I'd never have survived that negotiating room had I not been jumping through similar hoops for years in a million little and big ways.

But asking for what you want isn't the end-all, be-all. Standing your ground; being firm, patient, sensible; sticking to your reasons and rationale; and running it through again and again, if necessary, are also key—because negotiating is a game of convincing. What you're asking for has to make sense to the person or people you're asking it of—they need to hear how what you're proposing adds value to their bottom line.

Such great words of wisdom, Karen. I know you've since left

eCompanies to start IPK [Idea + Process + Knowledge], which is a successful design company you're still running. You've obviously had tremendous success in your career, and I know a lot of women who have had successful careers and come to a place where they ask themselves, "What do I want to do to give back to the world?" Is this something you can relate to?

Absolutely. Creating National Singles Day here in the U.S. was a direct answer to that calling.

Tell us about that initiative and how you got it started.

In 2013, I was watching the evening news when a segment came on about the Singles Day phenomenon in China. It caught my attention because I'd never heard of a Singles Day before. I think it also resonated with me because I was single at the time. I thought, Wow, that's so cool, do we have something like that here? I Googled it and discovered a couple of singles-related efforts, but nothing comparable to what was going on in China and nothing that appeared to have any leadership behind it. Singlehood has become a growing trend in the U.S. so I thought, Why not set something up here?

After sharing a post about the Chinese Singles Day on my personal Facebook page and getting a lot of fun comments, I began to think the idea had some traction. People seemed to actually be interested in getting together to celebrate. So, being the internet person I am, I went ahead and set up virtual shop by buying a web address and creating social media pages. Then I put together some preliminary marketing materials—a quick logo, flyer, and web page—and went out to see if any local businesses might be willing to cohost a Singles Day gathering.

That's how it all started.

You mentioned earlier that when you put something intentionally out into the universe that you want to do, things kind of just fall into place. Is that how National Singles Day started taking off?

Absolutely. The first Singles Day was probably the most palpable, insanely amazing experience of that I've ever had, just because it was so completely fabricated out of thin air. I literally walked out my front door, by myself, with a homemade flyer, a little sheet of paper that said "National Singles Day; why should I care?" The paper had a logo at the top and a short description, that's it. And I just started talking to people. I got taken seriously because I spoke with confidence, which I'd learned from all those years running my own business. And I got immediate enthusiasm in return, which then inspired me to move along and take the next step.

I think by the second or third day of walking my West Hollywood neighborhood handing out National Singles Day flyers, I had started introducing myself as "Karen Reed, with National Singles Day," more or less what I'd done back in the old days when I'd say, "This is what we do . . ." instead of "what I do." Nobody needed to know I was starting this out of my living room.

To have witnessed how this was fabricated out of thin air, with no money, no funding, no big engine of people or anything like that—just my dogged perseverance, a few good friends, and a lot of people hitting the ground with their feet and arms, helping to do it—has been amazing.

You really seem to be tapped into what speaks to you. What advice would you give other people about how to find and make their life purpose happen?

I think most people's biggest problem is faith: simply believing it's possible. And then, if they do get going, they tend to try too hard, making

too big a deal out of details like logos, tag lines, and catchy marketing schemes long before they have anything to warrant fussing over.

I don't overthink it. Okay, I do overthink it sometimes. But then I go out and do one thing and just take that first step. It gets the ball rolling without biting off more than I can chew.

So my advice is to get out there and do—but keep your mindset open. Try not to put too much of a game plan in place. Things are unlikely to happen the way you plan them anyway. If your mind is too set, it's easy to become disappointed and give up. Don't hold on too tightly. Be flexible and keep your eye on the horizon. How you end up getting where you're going can take many different forms. Let the universe steer you as it sees fit—the less resistant you are, the further you'll go.

So you see the vision, you know what you want to do—like create a National Singles Day—but you don't have any rigid set of ideas about exactly how it's going to unfold. You just start taking actions and let things fall into place.

Yes, but it does take perseverance. It also takes believing in yourself and expressing your ideas with confidence.

You have to almost become the thing you're envisioning, get there in your mind ahead of time. If there's something you want to achieve in the future, you have to start acting like it, talking like it, feeling like it, and being it today. If you can't convince yourself, the people you're trying to win over aren't going to be convinced either.

Believe me, I get plenty of skeptical responses when I go out and try to pitch something like Singles Day. It seems I have a habit of proposing ideas that break the status quo. But I know in my heart, absolutely, that if I'm given the opportunity I'm looking for—if a door is opened, if a

check is written—I'm going to knock that baby out of the park. I have that confidence because I'm excited about the idea and because this kind of thing is something I've done so many times now. Sell it today. Build it tomorrow.

Go in with confidence, believe in yourself, and then deliver. Love it! So not only have you had a successful career and launched National Singles Day, you've also managed to create a singer/songwriter career for yourself. That was another really bold thing; tell me about that.

It's funny how all these experiences reinforce each other. My early career experience taught me how perseverance pays off; my business experience helped me learn how to stand up and be confident in front of all kinds of people and situations; Singles Day taught me how to generate a big idea out of thin air . . . but I was terrified at the thought of becoming a musician! Singing and playing an instrument on a stage is very different from presenting a PowerPoint in a boardroom.

It was definitely scary at first, but this much I knew: As an unknown, when you walk out on stage, the audience wants you to be amazing. The audience wants to love you. They want you to just get out there and go for it. It's an incredible vote of confidence you don't get in every walk of life. I used that energy to help me “fake it 'til I made it.” I knew if I just kept smiling and playing from my heart, I'd be okay. And I've had so much fun with it ever since.

You started this entire new career at what, age fifty?

I was fifty-two actually, if you can believe it. I think I had the typical “rock star fantasies” back when I was sixteen. I've played music and sung ever since I was a little kid. It was violin and church choir in the early days, then guitar. Once my career kicked in, I pretty much quit music though—no time. I'd pull out my guitar every now and then and strum a few tunes, but that was about it. Most of my friends didn't even know I

played. Then, a few years ago, I started getting into it again, took up the ukulele, and started writing songs.

I was having fun at home in my living room—I didn't ever play even for friends—but one of my very close friends came over for a glass of wine and I played for her one night. She said I blew her away.

She then invited me to a party at a friend's house where a small group of musicians were planning to sit around a fire and play. No, was my first response. I wasn't about to try to sit in with "real" musicians in any kind of capacity, but she ended up talking me into it.

When I got to the party, I left my ukulele in the living room and we all went out to the backyard. Everybody sang and shook percussion instruments and tambourines and drank wine.

It got late and I was saying goodbye to everybody, and one girl said, "We want to hear your ukulele!" I told her I had left it in the living room. But my friend ran inside and got it, and I played the only song I really felt like I could confidently get through, which I had just written three days earlier. When I finished, everyone clapped and went crazy.

Then one of the musicians, Janet Robin, an amazing singer-songwriter and guitarist who's played with Lindsey Buckingham, Air Supply, and Meredith Brooks, came over to me and said, "Send me that song." I told her I couldn't because I'd just written it a couple days ago. And she said, "Well, come over and we'll record it. We can make it sound really good."

I was floored. I thought it would be a fun fluke, something to say I did, a bucket list check-off: recording a song with a professional musician. But what began as one song turned into an EP and then an album. And, in the process, I began performing, meeting more musicians, and continued to write. With Janet's encouragement and guidance, I ended up taking my music to the next level.

Wow, this was obviously a pivotal moment. One minute, you're sitting in your living room playing your ukulele for your friend, then this famous musician is helping you record your music. How many CDs do you have now?

I have one CD and a couple of singles available on iTunes and other web stores. I've been working on material for a second album and continuing to do local shows, both solo and with a full band. I'm really glad this music chapter opened up in my life, and so unexpectedly. It's been so fun to be able to make music, grow it, and share it with others.

You've done so many amazing things in your life. Have they brought you a lot of joy?

Yes, absolutely. I enjoy the challenge of all the things I do. Even though breaking new ground can be hard and frustrating sometimes, I enjoy the problem-solving, and I enjoy the satisfaction of building something out of nothing. I also really enjoy giving back, sharing, and making other people happy.

I think we have to challenge ourselves in a lot of little ways all the time, because it's the little challenges that end up being the stepping-stones and practice steps that teach us how to move into the greater stratosphere of what we want to accomplish in this life.

I've done martial arts for years, and I remember back in the beginning dragging myself to the studio when I least wanted to: I'd had a horrible day at work, was tired, hungry, wanted to settle in with a nice dinner and a glass of wine, kick back in front of the TV. But I went to class anyway because I had to earn the thirty classes needed for my next belt test.

I'd walk out onto the mat in my bare feet and stiff white uniform, feeling cold and tired. And within the first fifteen minutes, just

stretching and warming up, I always felt transformed. I'd go from being that harried, exhausted, just-left-the-office person to someone who was exercising, feeling great, and going home to eat healthy and get a good night's sleep. I became sort of fascinated by the miracle of it all, how showing up was all it took to change my attitude and energy from bottoming out, to billowing up. It was such a great lesson.

Our Master at that school used to say, "Don't feel your way into action, act your way into feeling." It's become one of my favorite sayings. It really cuts to the heart of what we've been talking about here, that the best method for achieving your goal, or embarking on your dream, is to simply begin it. Once you've put yourself in motion, the rest will follow.

Right, and I think your underlying message is so strong: Believe in yourself, and then others will, too.

Exactly. And try not to put successful people on a pedestal. The most achieved among us also have their lazy and feel-like-crap days and have to pull themselves out of bed, begrudgingly open their laptops, sit down at their desks, lace up their shoes . . . whatever it is for them. Personally, I deal with these feelings all the time. It's not about being perfect and somehow rising above all that. It's about doing what you've got to do, even when you least feel like it. It's acting your way into "feeling." Act first, feel like it later. Maybe that should be my slogan.

So inspiring! Thank you for the interview. I appreciate you so much.

You're welcome; thank you for including me. I love what you're doing!

CATHERINE GRAY

DEFEATING GAY PREJUDICES TO CREATE CHANGE



Author/Activist

Heidi Shink

A community leader with more than 30 years of experience advocating for LGBT, social justice, environmental, and women's rights, Heidi was elected to the California Democratic Party's State Central Committee and currently serves as planning commissioner for the City of West Hollywood (as well as on numerous other committees and boards).

A true Renaissance woman, Heidi has toured professionally as a singer with Chaz Bono, worked as a senior producer at E! Entertainment Network, and is a Huffington Post columnist and published author. For more information, visit <http://HeidiShink.com>.

Heidi Shink, it's so good to see you, as always. You're such an

eclectic person, and you've been involved in so many things: animal rights, gay rights, and environmental rights. With the focus of this book being women helping women, I'd like to concentrate on that, so lets visit your younger years. What was the pivotal moment that really changed your life and put you on a trajectory toward everything you're doing today?

The most inspiring thing to me when I was young was finding out that my grandmother came over to this country as a divorcée, which was very risqué in those days.

What year was that?

The early 1900s. She came over from Russia with children. She didn't speak the language, but she was a very brilliant woman. She had the temerity to become a suffragette. I saw a picture of her in this big, long black petticoat, holding this umbrella with a big sign that says, "Women's Suffrage Now."

Women's suffrage was about a woman's right to vote, yes?

Exactly. Women didn't get the right to vote in the United States until 1920. My grandmother came off the boat and immediately became political. I saw that picture of her very young.

My father said to me when he showed me the picture (and my father was a feminist before there was a word for it), "My mother demanded change when she barely had her feet in American culture. She knew she needed to be part of change. You are American. All the opportunities are there for you. You just have to live your life every day like you can make a difference."

He didn't know I was lesbian at the time, but he said to me, "Don't

ever depend on a man to take care of you because you don't know if they're going to come or go, or your relationship is going to last. You have to depend on you." He instilled a great sense of social justice in me, and he also made sure I took care of myself.

My heart always goes back to the issue of women's rights. Even today, we're second-class citizens. People don't realize that rhetoric becomes reality. The rhetoric coming out of half of our political system in this country, which accounts for 49 percent of voters, is anti-women and misogynistic.

If we as women, in general, don't take care of pushing our rights forward, whether it's advocating for a living wage, becoming business owners, speaking out against inappropriate behavior in the workplace, things like that—if we don't start taking care of these things ourselves and keep pushing the ball forward, we're going to start taking steps backward. That's my fear.

By “advocating for a living wage,” you mean we need to ask for bigger paychecks, correct?

Absolutely. Ask for higher wages. Women don't ask for them, and we don't demand them. We chronically feel underqualified, when we're overqualified. This is a fact, by the way.

For example, when I was running for the West Hollywood City Council, I found out that there are ten criteria that people look at when they're thinking about becoming a candidate. And the following fact hit me right between the eyes, because it's statistically true: If men have just one of the ten qualifications, they'll feel it's appropriate for them to run. If women don't have at least nine of them, they won't run. Women, themselves, hinder their own ability to move forward.

This example is referring to politics, but it actually applies elsewhere.

I'm not sure if the statistic is the same for different jobs, but I know the statistics tell us that women feel they have to be overqualified to ask for a raise, appropriate pay, compensation for their work, their time, their energy, and their effort. Even if they're going for a different title in their company without more pay, women will feel they have to be overqualified to ask for it. Men do it even when they're underqualified.

Wow. We'll delve more into the topic of empowering women, but let's switch gears back to your personal journey for a bit. I know another pivotal moment for you was when you realized you were gay, and sharing that with your family. Tell us that story.

That was probably the biggest pivotal moment in my life. The lightbulb for my sexual orientation went off, and I articulated the words "I'm gay" to myself when I was seventeen. I was just graduating high school. I was thrilled to discover this, even though it was the late seventies/early eighties, when being gay was sort of a notch below child killer in this country. It was not a good time to be gay.

My parents were a great example of that, because they were a bastion of liberalism. They took me to marches for the voting-rights movement for African Americans in this country. As I mentioned, my dad was a feminist. He was talking about women's rights when I was very, very young. But they drew the line at gay. Gay was too far.

So I came out to them, and then they kicked me out of the house. Literally overnight, I lost my entire family. Like many families do, they think as a pack. So I lost everyone from my grandparents to my sisters to my aunts and uncles to my cousins. No one in my family spoke to me. I was literally on my own at seventeen years old.

Lucky for me, I was able to move into Manhattan. I'm from New York, and in those days, there were affordable places you could rent. I got my first apartment, and I just started to put one foot in front of the

other.

From there, it became finding a job and a community. The first thing I got involved with was the precursor to what would become ACT UP. ACT UP was really one of the first very organized, effective LGBT activist groups in the country. It was really cohesive. People were dying in the eighties of AIDS. They were dying very quickly, so there was a sense of urgency to what this group was doing.

I fell into it because I was looking for a group that could help empower me. I never felt internal homophobia. I never felt like I needed to fit in with society. Instead, I always felt there was something wrong with the society that judged me.

So I immediately got involved with activism. That was very empowering because it gave me a voice. I think women don't ordinarily feel like they have a voice. We feel voiceless, and we often feel powerless. I needed to find something, not only to have an individual voice, but also to be part of a collective.

I think most people find when they try to move in a new direction on their path, it's very important to find support. It sounds like you found that.

Absolutely. Look, if I had had to fight my way completely on my own, I might still have landed on my feet because of the nature of my personality. But there's no doubt that finding myself immersed within a group of people who were going through exactly what I was going through at that time, who were as angry and demanding big change as I was . . . the fact that I found them was—talk about another pivotal moment. I actually think that group saved me. Instead of going through my life white-knuckling it, I had a support system that I not only took from, but I gave back to.

What changes at that time were you trying to make?

The first thing that we needed to do was not be invisible as a community anymore. People needed to come out. These were the days right on the cusp of Harvey Milk being assassinated. One of the things he said, which is actually my favorite quote, was “Coming out is a political act.”

Even if the only thing you do in your life, in terms of activism, is coming out to your coworker or coming out to your best friend or coming out to your parents, you have done a ginormous political act. Not everybody has to devote their lives to activism. Little things done by lots of people create big change.

That’s so true, what you’re saying is about being authentic. And when we’re authentic, we have a better shot at living happy lives.

Exactly. When I found this community, like I said, it was a symbiotic relationship. When I first joined, I was a seventeen-year-old kid. All these people really helped me. And by the time I was able to get on my feet, I was then giving back to the community—and I never stopped.

That’s what I call 360 Karma!

Yup. That’s 360 Karma right there. Community should be a symbiotic relationship, where you’re both giving and getting. I live that way with my friends as well.

I can name one hundred favors that they’ve asked of me and one hundred favors I’ve given back in return. We’re certainly not keeping tallies, but when someone asks something of me, it’s “yes.” And how do I make it happen so that they’re happy?

Karmically, somewhere along the line—and I'm not even thinking about this when I'm doing it—it always somehow seems to come back to me. Maybe it doesn't come directly through that particular person—maybe it's a friend of that person, or maybe it's just somehow interrelated. But there's never a time where I've given something away and it doesn't feel like there's some sort a reward in it, even if it isn't tangible.

On a sadder note, but similar, my first partner in life passed away from ovarian cancer. Her parents never accepted her sexual orientation. Even though we weren't together when she was sick, I was her primary caregiver. Obviously, during the time between her diagnosis and her passing, there wasn't much that she was really able to give back, and I didn't think about what I was doing, I just took care of her.

I was only really able to see the gifts that I received from going through that process retrospectively, when there was some distance between the grief of losing her and going through the whole mourning process. Being a caretaker, you receive endless gifts; the lessons I learned have come back to me in so many miraculous ways throughout my life since then. It's incalculable.

It's so funny, every time I peel back one layer to find out something you've done, then ten more unfold; it's beautiful. And it's very inspiring that you've done so many different things and done them all so well, everything from activism to writing books, making music with your partner, working with Cher on building her website, and launching a new venture that's really giving back to the world. I don't know how you do it all. It's amazing.

Everything I've done has one common thread: empowering people in some way. And this includes the music I've created. I think the arts are necessary for a lot of people who have very tough lives. Music and the arts are very cathartic.

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Absolutely. When you and your wife met, you were both in a band, yes?

I was in a band with Chaz Bono. Then my wife, Caitlin, and I started a band, and Chaz ended up playing with us. He's sort of a de facto party; he's the percussionist for our band. We make music for film and TV: PSAs, corporate videos, just really anything that seems to come our way.

We don't actively go looking for gigs because we both have two independent careers. I do writing and politics for a living, and Caitlin is a nationally known sommelier with a book out as well.

What's the name of her book?

Wineocology. She's the top female sommelier in the country. Wine is definitely an industry where you don't see a lot of women being accepted in the profession, and she's a lesbian on top of it. You just don't find that mixture.

You co-wrote Wineocology with her, correct?

Yes. Even just trying to get that book published, we suffered. There were actually publishers that said they wanted to credit her as "C. A. Stansbury" instead of "Caitlin Anne" so readers wouldn't know she was a woman.

Wow, just like back in the old days when female writers used initials or pseudonyms. It just goes to show how far behind women are, even today. We've got to change that, Heidi.

Well, we did, because Caitlin and I said, “No, we’re going to find the right publisher.”

Good for you! And you two were among the very first same-sex couples in the United States to get married, yes?

That’s right. When Massachusetts became the first state to allow same-sex marriage, Caitlin and I flew there and got married. If you didn’t live in-state, there was a very small window when they allowed out-of-towners to marry. That was actually a loophole in the state law that they closed within, I believe, less than two weeks.

But the judge called you back into his chambers at the courthouse and you were concerned, right? What happened there?

Yes. We were concerned because, at the time, they were talking about issuing misdemeanors with marriage licenses. There was this notion that you could actually be slapped with something if you got married there and lived in another state. It basically meant you’d have to fly back to Massachusetts for a court case if you were living out of state. And it dissuaded a lot of people from coming there en masse to get married.

So we get called back into the judge’s chambers, and we thought that’s what they’re doing, that [we were] in real trouble, which, actually, couldn’t have made me happier, because I like to push boundaries. When I see injustice, I’m going to hit it like a bull head-on; I couldn’t wait to get in front of the judge. Although, truthfully, it was a bit intimidating to be called back in his chambers. This was in Massachusetts, so everything looked like, literally, you were sitting next to the Founding Fathers: big mahogany desk and the whole thing. The judge was very conservative looking; he had robes on and the lace dickey, etcetera.

Anyway, he called us in and said, “The reason I’m calling you in is that forty years ago, I was on the wrong side of civil rights. I was a young lawyer and I fought against Martin Luther King and that movement. I had an epiphany that I was on the wrong side for all these years, for decades, and I’ve been carrying this guilt around, never able to right my wrong.

I wanted to call you back because you’re the first out-of-state same-sex couple that I’m marrying, and I wanted to meet you and thank you for the gift you’re giving me before I die. I’m an old man, and I never thought I’d have the opportunity to right my wrong.

I’m on the right side of history now. I will represent you. As a judge, I will represent you all the way to the state supreme court, if need be, to defend your right to hold this certificate that I’m about to sign. I wanted you to watch me sign it. I want you to be able to know that there’s somebody in the judicial system in this state who will stand by your side all the way.”

My nieces were in the room with us, along with the rest of my family—they had all come around by that time and were supportive of us. So the whole family was standing there and the judge had us come behind his desk to watch him. He used different pens to sign the documents, all Montblancs. And, as he signed, he gave each pen to each person in my family so that they’d have something to remember this historic moment in U.S.—and my family’s—history. That’s how we were married.

That’s such a beautiful and important story—you can see how the LGBT advocacy work you did with ACT UP as a teen paved the way for you to gain the right to marry your wife later in life. Now, bringing the conversation specifically back to women’s rights, I’m wondering, of all the things you’ve advocated for, what do you think has impacted women the most?

Well, I'm currently doing a lot within the living-wage movement because I think the biggest women's issue has always been economic. Without economic freedom, it's very hard for us.

Emma Goldman, who's one of my heroes, was a Jewish woman who was big in the labor rights movement. She came to this country in the 1800s, and she said she left Russia trying to escape religious persecution—only to come to America and face economic persecution. She actually said she didn't know which was worse. Because, if we can't support ourselves, what good is living in a democratic society? So forwarding our ability to earn a decent compensatory wage that's equal to men is one of my primary efforts.

Some readers might be wondering how they can help move that issue forward. And, from my point of view, I think we have to help each other. I think we need to stop competing and start pulling each other up—those who've made it need to pull others who are behind them. We need to give people the tools, the knowledge, and the mentorship to help them move forward. That's the only way we're going to change things. That's what 360 Karma is all about.

What you're saying is exactly right. As women, we've tended to compete in the past because there are so few places for us

Of the top 500 tech companies, only twenty-four have CEOs that are female.

That's crazy. That's 5 percent. It should be 50 percent. **And it's pretty much the same in politics, right? You've been in politics a good part of your life. I know you're writing a book about women in politics. Would that be for the sake of bringing more women into that arena?**

I know people tend to be wary, leery, and even cynical about politics. They can be all of those things, but women must become more political. We make up 51 percent of this country, and if we don't start voting—forget about running for office right now—our rights are going to be taken away from us. They will be usurped. We have to get involved in the political process, whether we like it or not. We fought so hard to get the right to vote. Exercise it, ladies. To me, it's sacrosanct.

When you say vote, people are probably thinking, Okay, I need to vote for president, or I need to vote for congress or senate. They might not realize how important their local politics are.

I think local politics are actually more important. Local elections impact where you live: the taxes you pay, your property value, your schools, your roads, your lights, your stop signs. It's just as important to vote locally as it is state and national. The quality of your life depends on your city council.

I'll give you a great example of that from when I was running for city council. In our parks in West Hollywood, the lights are a certain distance apart. Men determined where those lights were placed.

Now, the farther apart lights are in public spaces, the greater the chance of a woman running into some sort of violent episode, whether it's burglary or something worse like rape or some sort of physical harm. This is statistically true. The closer lights are together—meaning the more illumination that we have on the streets—there's less of a chance that women will be harmed.

So one of the things that I've been lobbying for is to put up more street lamps in West Hollywood. And one of my local council members, who happened to be a man, said to me, "Just punch the guy in the face if somebody comes to attack you. Why can't a woman just defend herself?" I looked at him like, Are you for real? This is what we're

up against, as women.

On a national level, Barack Obama doesn't know where our street lamps are. Our congressman doesn't know where our street lamps are. But you better believe our local council members do. And whether they're male or female is going to color their interpretation of what the distance between them should be.

Street lamps impact the people who live in this city—and in every city or every town, and every community. Something as seemingly mundane as how far apart they are can make all the difference in the world. And that's just one example. Women need to start voting.

That's a very simple but great example. We need women in every area of policy making—local, national, state, citywide—because the way women think is different than the way men think. We need both ideologies in order to make a community that's good for everyone. But if you only have the input of one and not the other, you're lacking.

Actually, I would go a little further. I think we've done it Man's way—and I say that with a capital “M” —we've done it this way for a really long time, for millennia. I think it's time for women to not just have a voice, not just have an equal voice, but to really get in there.

The Dalai Lama said that if women don't start taking control of policy in the twenty-first century—and he was talking globally—that we will not see a twenty-second century. I believe it's not just a matter of us making inroads. I think that we actually need to start usurping, meaning I won't be happy with women in only 50 percent of political positions, even though we're nowhere near that. I want to surpass it.

Right, because in all types of issues that we're looking at globally—

environmental issues, war, famine, the way women and gay people are being treated in other countries—if women were to be in power, those things would be handled differently.

Yes, they would be; it's a proven fact. And I rarely give props to my republican friends, but even during the big stalemates in Washington, the interesting thing is that the only people who were talking from both sides of the aisle were the women. The men will even tell you this.

Republican women and democratic women are trying to change policy. They're talking to each other to try to find compromise. That's a woman's way. Men tend to be very territorial: "This is my opinion." Women tend to try to find that place where everybody can find some piece they're happy with. That's just our nature. Men and women are different in terms of our nature.

We've done it a certain way up until this point. Unfortunately, the pages of history have not been written with a lot of goodness. There are a lot of pages of blood. It's time for us to have a matriarchal power structure rather than a patriarchal. We've tried it the patriarchal way for millennia. It's gotten us near the brink of extinction in the twentieth century. I actually believe we need to return to not just an egalitarian societal structure, but a matriarchal one—and the Dalai Lama agrees with me.

You're in good company!

So what advice would you give to women who want to get out there and make a difference?

The first thing that they have to do is stop waiting to be perfect—stop waiting to have nine out of ten criterion before taking action. Know that you're okay right where you are. Stop making so many comparisons. It's not helpful. Know that you're perfect right where you are and start

there.

Also, know that every action, whatever it is, is important. Every time a woman says, “Gee, I don’t know how I’m going to do this, but I’m going for it anyway,” she’s making a difference. She’s showing by example, whether she realizes that people are looking at her or not; every little action is a big action.

The first thing I tell women is “just start doing.” They say the first step on the road less traveled is the hardest, so I say let go of the thoughts about that first step because thoughts usually end up turning into doubts—and doubts lead to inaction.

Instead, say, “Okay, this is my life’s purpose. This is what I want to do, even if it’s for a day, a month, a year, or the rest of my life.” Just take that first step, whatever it is. And don’t wonder, How am I going to get there? However you’re going to plan to get there, I promise you, it’s not going to go that way. Just start doing it. If you take that very first step, magic happens. People will start walking into your life to help you.

And you have to keep your eyes open to see them . . .

That’s right, you have to have your eyes wide open. Somebody might say, “You need to call this person,” but then it’s up to you if you make that call. You have to be in forward motion at all times.

The advice I would say to anybody trying to accomplish anything is that inactivity is the death of your dreams. Action, even the littlest one, even if you say, “Today I just don’t have it in me to do A, B, and C, so I’m just going to do A. I’m going to pick up the phone and make that one call.” Whatever it is, when you do that, magic happens.

For me, there’s not a day—including weekends, by the way—

that I'm not in action with something. Sometimes it's just a little teeny tiny thing, because I also need time to relax. But there's always something that I'm doing to advance something in my life or my business or a cause that I'm working on. I only have one life. Time goes by so quickly; it's important to always be in action.

Would you say you've reached a place, with everything you've done at this point, where you feel happy?

Happiness, to me, is a day-to-day. I have to work on happiness as much as I have to work on anything. And that's a choice. I can get bogged down in the details like everybody else. Like, "Geez, I've got a mortgage. My property taxes are going to be due soon . . ." But happiness is something that's on my to-do list as well. I have to take care of that, too. And, if that means doing something nice for my wife, my mom, my dad, a best friend, or a stranger, whatever it is, I need to consciously make time to do it, and I have to follow through.

I happen to be in a situation where I've chosen the things in my life very carefully, and I also happen to glean happiness from work. That's a luxury. Some people don't have that.

For some people, their work is drudgery. It pays their bills. Then they have to find their happiness someplace else. It's important to understand that ripple effects happen negatively and positively—and they also ripple out from you and come back to you.

If you're like, "Why aren't my dreams coming true?," you're carrying around all that weight of unhappiness and drudgery. You're putting that out into the world in different ways, and it's coming back to you in different ways. And all of it has an effect on you. It slows you down.

Let's say somebody's feeling like, Ugh, that's me. I just go through

the motions every day. How could they change that?

I think the best way to do that is acceptance. I was just having this conversation with my sister. She was saying, “I feel like I’ve been trapped in that movie Groundhog Day. I’m doing the same thing over and over again. What do I do?”

I asked her if she could leave her job and she said, “Well, no. It pays really well, and da-da-da.” I said, “Do you get enjoyment from the things it pays for?” She said, “Well, yeah, I do.” I said, “Then accept that this is the choice you’re making. You’re staying there. You might not love what you’re doing from nine to five, but you sure do love it from 5:01 to whatever time you go to bed.”

She lives in a nice home, drives a nice car, enjoys the weekends. She and her husband travel. It’s been sort of an ongoing conversation we’ve been having for a while. But she finally said to me the other day, when she was at work, “You know what, Heidi? I’m okay.”

That’s so great; she shifted her perspective. Life is all about perspective. Is the glass half empty or half full? You can look at it either way.

Exactly. If your job is not your passion but it’s a means to an end, then great, enjoy the end. Say, “I can’t wait to pick up my paycheck.” I’ve said that to friends of mine a thousand times: “Get your paycheck and smile. Then do what makes you happy.”

Maybe it’s giving back so that you can be grateful for your job. Go to the unemployment lines. Go to downtown LA and see people carrying signs: Will Work For Food. You’ll start appreciating your job a whole lot more.

You might have to search for ways to find acceptance of a job that

you're not happy in, or a dream that's not coming true, so you don't feel so stuck. Find a way to be grateful for what you have until you get where you want to be. Shift your focus to what's positive in your life. Feel grateful for love and friendship and laughter, for the ability to give back. If you're not where you want to be right now, it doesn't mean giving up your dream. It just means this is where I'm at today.

It's definitely about finding gratitude and about giving back—you're certainly the epitome of that.

It's time for women to help women. Now is the time. That's why I want to write a book on women in politics, as opposed to just politics. Women are coming into our own, and the first thing we have to remember is that we'll do better if we work together. We don't have to think of ourselves as "There's only room for one of us in the boardroom, so I'd better not be like all the rest of us." Instead, let's say, "I want to be sitting around this table where there's one guy and nine women," as opposed to one woman and nine guys. Yes, we're lucky just to get to the "two" mark at this time, but why not dream big?

The thing that I want to leave with is that as women, it's very hard to go through life solitary. We're pack animals. We'd do better if we did all this together. That's just the truth.

That's been proven with the old boys' club, right?

They do it all the time, actually. When you look at the political system, they're grooming young men—they don't even think twice about that. It's so ingrained in male culture. To their credit, they do it.

We need women to start doing that. I mentor lots of girls; I love mentoring girls. It's not that I don't want to mentor boys, but boys have a lot more opportunity for mentorship out there. I want to make sure

young women know there's someone older than them who can show them the ropes.

I absolutely believe there's room for nine women at the boardroom table, no matter what your profession is—no matter what your path is, there's room. Once we really see that—which, I think, is starting to happen—we'll start working together. And when we work together—

—**Magic!**

Magic. That's right.

Thank you, Heidi. Thank you for your inspiration and your insight. I know you walk the walk and talk the talk. You're a huge catalyst for change.

Thank you so much, Catherine. I appreciate that.

CATHERINE GRAY

Prevailing to Make a Difference



Professional Volunteer/Philanthropist

Annette Shapiro

A volunteer and advocate for more than 60 years, Annette is known as the most successful fundraiser for non-profit organizations in all of Los Angeles. She has raised millions of dollars for entities focused on women, the Jewish community, and diabetes—the latter becoming a focus of her efforts after her son was diagnosed at 16 years old with the disease (and, sadly, later passed away from it in his 50's).

Annette is on the Advisory Board of the Southern California Islet Consortium (SC-IC), where she provides guidance and supervision in order to facilitate the achievement of the Consortium's goal of establishing islet cell transplantation as a cure for Type 1 diabetes. You can read more about Annette's many achievements in the book, *Annette Shapiro: Professional Volunteer*.

I'm so happy to be able to have this interview with you. You're an

extraordinary woman. I don't think I've ever met someone who has accomplished more in the area of raising funds for nonprofits than you. But, before we jump into all that, I want to share an interesting story.

I've read your book, *Annette Shapiro: Professional Volunteer*, and you and I have something in common! I'm reading along, and I see that you met Henry Kissinger when you were speaking at an event, and that you asked him if he'd write a letter to congress woman Margaret Heckler to suggest you be on the board for the National Diabetes Association. The next thing you know, you get a letter from Margaret Heckler. I went to school with her daughter, Allison Heckler. She was one of my best friends.

How strange!

I'd go to their house all the time. Margaret Heckler was one of the first congresswomen. I think she was the Secretary of Health and Human Services at that time, which is why you reached out to her through Kissinger, right? What a small world.

Isn't that funny? Henry Kissinger was so warm and so nice. I sat next to him at the event you mentioned. That was such a nice experience.

I can only imagine! And I want to talk about all your extraordinary volunteer work, but I'd like to start with what made you who you are in the realm of wanting to always help other people. I know you came from a family that emphasized the idea of giving back. It started with your grandfather, right?

Yes, my grandfather, David Familian, who came to the United States from Russia in 1906. In those days, the Russian Jews who were coming to the states were living in a neighborhood called Boyle Heights

in East Los Angeles, California. So that's where he ended up living. And he essentially became the patriarch of that neighborhood, a wonderful influence in the philanthropic world in Boyle Heights. He started the Jewish Free Loan, and the Jewish Burial Society in Los Angeles.

Because of my parents, I grew up understanding that there's a lot in your own community where you can make a difference in people's lives. So, being Jewish—and a woman—I first started volunteering with Hadassah, a Jewish women's organization. A woman who lived on our street said to me one day, "I think you should get involved in Hadassah." And I listened to her; I got involved. That was my first step.

Also, my parents were very involved in the City of Hope. As a teenager, I was very involved in the early days of the City of Hope. We started a group called Junior Sportsman's, which came out of the adult group, Sportsman's Club. That's actually how I met my husband. He came to a fund-raising meeting, and that's where we met.

It seems like you've developed three areas of interest: health, women, and the Jewish cause. Would you say these three areas have been your focal points?

Yes, they're my focal points—very much so. But for a long time, I did what I did and didn't talk about it. The people around me just weren't particularly involved in things, and I didn't want to bore them by telling them what I was doing. I don't like to brag about what I do, I just do it. But then I realized, as time went on, that I have to tell people because I have to bring people along with me.

That's great advice for other people to hear.

Yes, it really is. That's how things grow.

You can be humble but still share what you're doing with other people, to help bring them along, because most everybody wants to be giving back in some way.

Most everybody; that's true. I love bringing people along with me. When I first got involved in diabetes, it was a silent disease. People didn't talk about it because it could cause a lot of problems with their health insurance and employment. But it's different today. You can get insurance as a diabetic now. In those days, it was very, very difficult for a diabetic to get insurance.

I chose to get involved with the American Diabetes Association when my son had diabetes. I started when he first got it; he was sixteen. And I was very influential in getting many of my friends who were touched by diabetes in some way involved in the American Diabetes Association. We started a group called the Select Committee. Gordon Stolberg, Frank Wells, Bruce Reimer, myself, and Shirley Firestein—and another gal, Jackie Perlson. Jackie's son had diabetes. All of us had been touched by a family member with diabetes.

We all sat down with Frank Wells, who was president of Disney at the time, and who also had a son who was diabetic. And he said, "Okay, I'll tell you what. I'll give you the proceeds from the premiere of one of our films every year if we can get the charter from the national American Diabetes Association to say the money will all go to research." And that's what we did. We had a premiere every year for probably fifteen years.

That's amazing! And just a drop in the bucket of what you've been able to accomplish for that organization. Do you think there'll be a cure for diabetes one day?

There's been a lot of progress, but there hasn't been a cure yet. One day, I hope.

You've been involved in an incredible number of organizations over the years—the list is really quite amazing. We won't have time to talk about everything here; I really do recommend everyone read your book to get the full scope. But I'd like to name some of the highlights listed in your bio.

It's a long list!

It is, indeed, and very inspiring. It says here your first leadership position was back in 1953 when you were president of the Junior Matrons of Hadassah, in the San Fernando Valley here in California.

Yes, that was a long time ago . . .

Over sixty years, which is amazing. You were Chair of the Board for the American Diabetes Association. And you're currently a member of the Board of Governors Executive Committee at Cedars-Sinai, you were cochair of the BOG's \$19,000,000 campaign for the Cedars-Sinai Center for Cancer Research, and you were an advisory board member of the UCLA School of Public Policy Affairs. You also were a member of the City of Hope's Southern California Islet Consortium Advisory Committee, and you're a founding member of the Board of Directors of Beit T'Shuvah. You were also the first woman Chairman of the Board of the Jewish Community Foundation, you served as Vice President of the Board of Directors of the Jewish Federation, and you were also a past Chair of the United Jewish Federation's Women's Campaign of Los Angeles.

What a busy woman!

I warned you it was a long list!

“Long” doesn't even begin to describe it, Annette; you're tireless!

It's absolutely amazing to me. And you've won over a dozen awards for your work, including the KCET Local Hero award, the Golda Meir Award, and the Addison B. Scoville volunteer award for outstanding contributions to the American Diabetes Association, to name just a few.

I've been very blessed. I absolutely love the work I do.

Blessed, indeed. And loving what you do is key. I'm curious, though—as a woman doing all this work, especially starting all those years ago, did you ever face any challenges?

About forty years or so ago, I created something on my own called Women, Power, and Money. I ended up going to the Jewish Community Foundation and I worked with one of the staff people there to hold seminars for women. I invited attorneys, and I invited investment counselors, to come and speak to women. Some men weren't too happy with me; we didn't have the kinds of female empowerment resources around back then like we have today. Things were much different then.

Forty years ago, you started a women's empowerment group? Wow! As you know, I'm all about empowering women. So what advice would you give women about how to find their life's purpose?

I think it's important to find where there's a need in your community that aligns with an interest of yours, and start there. You never know where that might lead.

No, you don't know where it might lead, and you'll definitely never know unless you put yourself out there, right?

Exactly. You have to put yourself out there. That's key.

A lot of people reach out to me and say they want to start their own nonprofit. Since you've been so entrenched in this for many decades, what advice would you give people if they wanted to start a nonprofit?

Since there are so many nonprofits out there already, and they're all in such competition for funding, I recommend trying to find an existing organization you can help. It's certainly okay to try and start something up, but I've got to tell you, I have a wastebasket full of mail asking for money. It's very, very hard to start something new and have it be successful.

I hear what you're saying. Existing nonprofits are out there vying for funding so it's important to see if there are any organizations already out there that you can get involved with before trying to create a new one. But if you've got a passion for creating your own nonprofit, and you see a need for it in your community, then I think it's also important to honor that dream. Wouldn't you agree?

Yes, by all means follow your dream! I'm not looking to discourage anyone. I just want people to know the reality of the landscape and to consider what already exists. There are so many organizations out there already that need your help, and lending your talents to one of them might be a less challenging path toward your goal of making a contribution to the world.

Speaking of challenges, one of the aims of this book is to help women overcome adversity. Do you think one of the biggest challenges you've had in your life was losing your son to diabetes?

Yes, absolutely. The biggest challenge, for sure.

When your son passed away, you could've just said, "I can't do anything else. I'm done." But you didn't. I often find that good things can come out of things that challenge us. Did losing your son fuel you in some way to keep moving forward?

It definitely fueled me. I think when you get through adversity in life, it pushes you to fill your time with positive things, which, in turn, helps you get through adversity when it strikes.

One thing I've noticed about you, just in the little time I've spent with you, is that you have such a beautiful energy and you seem to be a very happy person. I want to help people tap into their ability to live, love, and thrive, and I think it's all tied to giving back. Would you agree?

Absolutely. By getting involved in your community, you get a better understanding of what's going on in the world—you gain a bigger perspective that can be very helpful. With a bigger perspective, you're often able to realize that your problems are not nearly as serious as most of the other things that are going on in the world. Everybody's got something they're dealing with.

I always say a support system is so important in life. It sounds like you've had a good support system with family, friends, and other people who've been involved in the nonprofit work you do.

Yes. And, in my particular case, I couldn't have done what I've done without my husband's encouragement. I think it's important to have the encouragement of your spouse or your partner, and that they have similar ideals and support your endeavors.

It also ends up making life more interesting—and much more rich, right?

Absolutely. That's exactly right.

You are living proof of that—you're such an inspiration.

I see what happens to people, their tragedies and their struggles. I feel very fortunate. Why not give back?

Exactly. And so simply put: Why not give back? Thank you, Annette. Thank you, Catherine!

9
PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF



Singer/Entertainer

Pamala Stanley

The consummate “entertainer’s entertainer,” Pamala Stanley is a magical vocalist who is at home with classics, Broadway, pop, dance, and all spaces between. Performing and recording since the age of ten, Pamala first entered the Top Twenty Billboard Dance Charts in 1979 with the EMI America release, “This Is Hot.” The song reached #13 on the Disco charts and received great acclaim in Europe, Mexico, and South America.

In 1983, Pamala’s single, “I Don’t Want To Talk About it,” written by her brother (Folk Legend), James Lee Stanley, also shot up to #13 on the Billboard Disco charts—and set the stage for television shows like Dance

Fever, and American Bandstand. Her next single, “Coming Out of Hiding,” was #4 for the year in 1984 on the same Billboard charts, and the video received extensive worldwide airplay on cable networks and numerous television shows.

Pamala later went on to form the Pamala Stanley Band, with a Blues, Jazz and Boogie style—and in 2010, further showcased her musical diversity, releasing the Contemporary Christian CD, “I Am There.” In 2014, she launched an hour-long weekly Radio show on WKQA in Norfolk VA – “I Don’t Want To Talk About It ...But I Will!,” featuring her homespun humor, entertainment, music, and special celebrity guests.

Pamala continues to sing and perform in Theatres, Clubs, Private Events, and many Cruise Lines around the world, traveling extensively with her sensational voice and her endless enthusiasm. Learn more about her at <http://pamalastanley.com>

Welcome, Pamala. You and I go back a long way, and I’m so excited to be talking with you today. So let’s dive right in. I’m curious—did you always know you were going to be a singer?

Yes, I knew from the time I was five. I didn’t even have another plan.

Wow, you just said to yourself, “I’m going to be a singer, and that’s all I want to be, and there are no other alternatives”?

When I was eight, my brother James Lee Stanley, my sister Sandra, and I had a group. We would enter and win all the contests around our area. We were on the Jerry Lewis telethon one night, and a record company signed us to a recording contract shortly after. I was ten by then and I said, “I’m going to sing my way around the world.” And that’s exactly what I ended up doing.

In my senior year, I started singing professionally in a band called The Rudy Wesley Show. Because I had good grades, they let me leave high school six weeks early to tour with the group. I just kept going after that.

Wow, that’s amazing. How did you get into that band?

I was dating a sweet country boy, Doug, from Elizabeth City, North Carolina. He said, “Honey, you sing really nice. I know this agent. You should get a job singing.” So I said okay.

So he takes me down to this agent’s office and the agent just goes, “Sing.” There’s no piano—no anything. I’m just standing in front of this man, and I’m singing. When I finished the song, he tells me, “I’ll keep you in mind.”

When I walked out of the office, there was a band sitting there; it was The Rudy Wesley Show. Rudy asked me, “Was that you singing?” I told him yes.

Then he says, “Well, you sing really great. Would you like to audition for our band?” I said sure, then he asked me if I knew “Harper Valley PTA.”

I told him yes, but I didn’t know it, so I had from 2:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. that day to learn it.

That night, during my audition, I got halfway through the song and forgot the words. I wasn't about to quit, though, so I just made up lyrics until I found my way back into the song. I thought, That's it. I'm never getting hired. But, at the end of the set, Rudy turns to me and says, "You're hired."

I said, "What?!" He said, "Anybody that would keep going like that . . . you're in."

That's how it all started for me. And I've never looked back.

That's such a great story. What would you say was the next pivotal moment for you in your career?

Well, when I was twenty-five, I left Cabrillo and moved to New York to try my hand at Broadway. A year later, a producer from Germany, Karl Schmitz, heard me sing. He asked if I would go out to breakfast with him and said, "I have a record deal for you."

I didn't really believe him at the time, but it happened—and they brought me to Germany. When I got there, they told me they wanted to make a white Donna Summer out of me.

I wanted to be on Broadway. I really wasn't familiar with disco music, but when I went to Germany, I realized I loved it. Then they told me they wanted me to write my own album. I was petrified.

So I went back home. I had never been a songwriter—maybe a few here and there. But I wrote some wonderful songs with renowned lyricist David Zippel, who was and still is a close friend of mine. I also recorded two songs with my brother, James, and wrote three songs with a writing duo, Lou Schere and Rhoda Roberts. In the summer of 1978, I went back to Germany to record my very first album. It was one of the most rewarding times of my life.

So that's how your disco career started?

Yes. I started in Germany with EMI Germany, then EMI all over Europe, and then EMI America signed me. That's when I moved to LA.

What was your first hit song?

“This Is Hot” in 1979. We were promoting the heck out of it. I was on tour and doing radio interviews everywhere. But then, shortly after that, disco died. It was November of 1979, and a big headline came out that literally said “DISCO DIES,” and people were burning their disco records.

The label left me on the road in Miami with no way home. They just completely pulled all of the money from my tour. But then an agent called me out of the blue about singing at a birthday party for a big fan of mine in Ecuador. And, on the plane to Ecuador, I met a TV producer who then helped me get on Ecuadorian TV. My album was released there, and I ended up becoming quite popular in South America—I even had my own Christmas special!

Then I came home and ended up running into an ex-boyfriend, Frank Mandaro, who became my second husband. EMI decided to drop me because I sounded too much like Sheena Easton. I was heartbroken. So I left the business and got married in May 1980. We moved to Dallas, Texas, because of Frank's job, and I just worked locally at a piano bar. Then I had a baby and was really ready and happy to give up the dream.

But Frank's father died two weeks after our son was born. That made such an impact on Frank, that we only have so much time on earth. He came to see me at a disco party in Dallas where I was performing my This Is Hot album, and after he said, “You're not a housewife. You're

made to be a singer, and you need to get back out there.”

So we raised the money to open our own label. My voice teacher gave us money. Even the doctor who delivered our baby gave us money. Ray Cooper and David Hilzendager, owners of Oak Lawn Records in Dallas, ended up becoming our partners. We had a ball.

They all believed in you . . .

They did, and we raised \$30,000. Back then, in 1982, that was actually a lot of money. So we opened up our own label and we put out “I Don’t Want To Talk About It.” I’d never produced before, but my husband said, “You know exactly what you want—get in there.” So that’s what I did. And with the help of Frank, Ray, and David’s ears, we had our first hit. “I Don’t Want To Talk About It” reached number thirteen on the Billboard dance chart and started my worldwide acclaim.

What was your next hit?

“Coming Out Of Hiding.” That went even farther—number four on the Billboard dance charts for the whole year.

Tell me about “Coming Out Of Hiding,” which became a national gay anthem.

I produced that song just wanting to make a great song. We were still living in Texas at the time, and I thought we were just going to get big in Texas. I had no idea “I Don’t Want To Talk About It” was going to go worldwide.

So, when “Coming Out Of Hiding” came out, we signed with Tom Hayden from TSR records in LA. He was a wonderful promoter.

We did a video that played on MTV, and the song just catapulted worldwide. It's still played today.

I went all over the world singing that song in clubs, on radio stations, and on so many television shows—it was the most played song on Dance Fever. It was very exciting. I really thank Tom for all his help.

You were on these TV shows with other disco artists like Linda Clifford and Sylvester . . .

Yeah, Linda Clifford, Sylvester, Paul Parker, The Weather Girls, Vicky Sue Robinson, Evelyn “Champagne” King, Jessica Williams, Viola Wills, Thelma Houston, Gloria Gaynor—I could go on and on. We were all on the same circuit.

The disco ladies of the eighties—disco made a comeback in the eighties.

Disco went nuts in the eighties.

You managed to pick yourself up and forge ahead as an independent recording artist after your record company disappeared. What was the next big challenge you faced?

Frank and I and our son had moved to Vegas in the early nineties. Dance music had changed, so we had gone into the real estate business. But one day Frank came home and said, “Honey, we lost everything . . .” Talk about hard times financially and emotionally.

We were totally broke and I looked at my son, who was nine at the time, and said, “You’re about to see the power of God.” We got on our knees, and I prayed. I said, “Dear Lord, I have a son, and I have to

support this boy. I don't know how to do it or what to do, but I know you know what to do. So I will trust you to show me the way."

One week later, I got an amazing contract offer from Ron Morrison in a restaurant/bar called Evangeline doing blues and jazz in Fort Lauderdale. So I picked myself up, and my son and I moved to Florida and started over.

So you and your husband separated and, as a single mom, you reignited your singing career? Again, for the third time?

Yes. Frank and I tried for a few years, but we never got our marriage back together again. We divorced in 1996. He went on to be a very successful restaurateur in Jersey City, New Jersey, remarried, and has two beautiful children. I kept performing and rebuilt my recording career with six CDs and a new single, "Lost In A Dream." Even though it seemed scary at the time, it all worked out.

It's a scary thing for moms to be out there and have children, be single, and think, I've got to feed this child and myself, and I have to take care of him, and I have to work.

My son, Frankie, was thirteen at the time Frank and I divorced. I had to work until one in the morning, but I worked sixty-seven miles from the house. So, by the time I got home, it was 3:00 a.m.

Every day, I got up at 7:00 a.m., got Frankie ready, and then I'd drive him to school. I'd be back home from driving him to school by 8:30 a.m., then I'd go back to bed until about 12:30, 1:00 p.m.—and then I'd get up, go and get him from school, and be back home around 3:00 p.m. We'd spend some time together, before I had to get ready for work. And then I'd leave at 7:00 p.m. to go drive sixty-seven miles back to work.

And then you'd do it all over again . . . I think a lot of single moms can relate to that.

Yes, but I'll tell you, when you're going through it, you just do it. You don't think, Oh, that was hard, or I can't do this. As a mother, you just do what's best for your child.

There are also a lot of women in positions where they're still married, like I was for a while, and it's still up to you to make everything work. You can be with someone and be totally alone, and that's a really hard place to be because you're looking for the other person to be your anchor, but you have no anchor. Frank and I made some very poor choices in our marriage, and we both paid dearly.

I think the message to women who are in a marriage that has imploded is that it's okay to move on. You can do it on your own.

Yes, you can do it on your own. For me it was a turning point in believing in myself, and even though I was scared, it was the best thing for both of us. I can't believe how much I grew from being on my own—all the fantastic experiences I've had, good and bad. I look at where I am now, and smile and thank God for the life I have.

I'm remarried now and am a new grandmother. I absolutely love my husband, Chris, and our life together. It is the happiest time of my life. And I know, in any relationship, there are going to be challenges. But any situations I encounter now, I just say, "This too shall pass."

I think people are put in our lives for whatever it is we need to work on. Do you agree?

Yes, and what I've really learned is that life is a book. Everyone

comes into your life for so many chapters. Some people are in the entire book. And some people are just in it for a few chapters. But just because they're not in the entire story doesn't mean they don't have value. Looking back, there were great things and times about my marriage to Frank, and I honor those. But it was not forever.

Life is a book, indeed, and I'd love to jump back into the chapters of your life involving your career a bit more. For your entire life, you've made a living as an artist, doing what you love. What's your advice to the women reading this who want to make a living as an artist, doing what they love, but might be reluctant to go for it?

If it's in your soul, if it's your calling, then go for it . . . just go for it. But remember that you're not there for you—you're there for your audience. This is where people tend to go wrong, in my opinion.

I perform every time for the audience. It's not about me. I don't just do songs I want to do. If you're an entertainer, a musician, whatever you are, give it all you've got. Do it for others. And do it with joy.

If you're having fun, you're going to attract and build your audience. Because it's not just about your talent; you have to reach people. That's why it's so important to do it for them. And, if you reach people, they'll stick with you. You'll build followers that way.

You're obviously very generous in your performances. Are there any other ways in which you feel like you give back?

I talk to a lot of young people to try and inspire them. I also perform a lot of benefits and visit old people's homes and convalescent centers. And I try to get to know my fans and create a conversation whenever I can.

I actually surprised a couple last week. I was in Delaware, and a

friend of theirs ran into me and said, “You sang at their wedding. They’re having a party.” I said, “Oh my God, really?” I got the address and I stopped by for twenty minutes. They were so surprised!

One of the things I love about you is how down to earth you are, and how authentic. I think people could learn from that. It all boils down to being your authentic self, even when you’re a celebrity. Wouldn’t you agree?

Absolutely. I met and sang with quite a few celebrities when I was coming up: Bette Midler, Tina Turner, Frank Sinatra, Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, and many more. It was so exciting, and I was so enthralled by them.

But then some of the celebrities I met—and I’m not going to mention any particular names—turned out not to be the people I thought they were. I was so disappointed. So for me, I decided that the girl who walked on the stage was going to be the same girl who walked off the stage. I didn’t want to be a different person like some of the people I had met.

No matter what profession you’re in—if you’re an artist or a banker or whatever you are—it really is all about being your authentic self. I think you’re a wonderful example of that.

Thank you, honey. Thank you.

Thanks so much for the interview today.

You’re very welcome!

SPEAKER AUTHOR BEVERLYE HUMAN FEAD –
SURVIVING AND THRIVING WITH CANCER



Author/Speaker

Beverlye Hyman Fead

Beverlye received a stage IV cancer diagnosis in 2002, but she didn't let that stop her from following her dreams. Over 13 years later, she continues going strong. A true inspiration, Beverlye has since written three books and has a popular blog called *Aging in High Heels*.

Her first book, *I Can Do This: Living with Cancer, Tracing a Year of Hope*, was published by the Cancer Center of Santa Barbara in 2002 and went on to sell 9,000 copies by word of mouth, alone. Her award-winning second book—which she co-wrote with her granddaughter, Tessa Mae Hamermesh—titled *Nana, What's Cancer?* answers the questions children might have regarding the disease and was featured on *Good Morning, America*.

In 2010, Beverlye wrote and produced a short documentary on Stage IV

cancer survivors, entitled *Stage IV: Living With Cancer* that has won several awards in film festivals and is currently playing on websites and in cancer centers all across the country.

In addition to her books and blog, Beverlye has written articles for *The Huffington Post* and has appeared on *CNN Health*, *CBS News*, and numerous radio shows across the country. For more information, visit <http://beverlyehymanfead.com>.

Hi Beverlye!

Hi Catherine. I just love the concept of what you're doing here. I'm very excited to be involved in this.

Thank you; I'm excited you're joining us. So, let's dive right in! We're talking with women about adversity they've overcome in their lives. Were there any challenges early in your life that you felt you had to overcome?

Well, since the time I can remember—about five years old—we moved around a lot. I think I lived in thirteen different houses and went to several different grammar schools. I attended three different junior highs, two high schools.

Why was that?

My father was fixing up houses and flipping them before anybody knew about fixing up houses and flipping them. Just as I'd come home from school and say, "Mom, I made the greatest new friends at school today," she'd say, "Well, we just sold our house. We're moving next month."

That must have been a tough thing to deal with growing up.

It definitely was a tough thing, but the good news is I made friends wherever I was, and I never looked back. I might have missed some friends, but I went on to make new friends. It became easy for me to meet people, talk to people, and be with new people all the time. That has stuck with me to this day.

The other thing I had to overcome came a bit later. My mother got cancer when I was twenty-seven. In those days—this was fifty or fifty-five years ago—“cancer” was a word you didn’t utter out loud. Cancer was a dirty word. People used to whisper, “She has cancer.”

Back then, you listened to one doctor, you did whatever he thought was best for you, and then you had operations and chemotherapy—and you most likely died. That’s just how it was in those days.

Shortly after my mom passed away, my two sisters followed suit. So that was pretty traumatic for me.

How old were your sisters?

One sister was fifty-five, and the other sister was sixty-three. No woman in my family ever lived past sixty-three.

Wow, that must have been quite scary for you.

Yeah, that was scary. And it shaped my life. I think it had a lot to do with me leaving my first husband of twenty-eight years. I was in my late forties at the time, I wasn’t happy, and I thought, I don’t have that much longer to live. I’d better do what I want to do now. I’d better live the kind of life I want to live now.

I had an urgency that maybe other people didn't have. Or so I thought. I mean, here I am at eighty-one, so who knew?

Would you say dropping everything to pursue your happiness was a pivotal moment for you?

Yes, that was definitely a pivotal moment for me. I was a painter all my life, before I started writing. I used to paint in this little room in between my two children's rooms. Then one night, at a dinner party, a woman stood up and said, "Would anybody like to share an art studio in Venice with me?" And much to my surprise—and definitely my husband's surprise—I said yes.

I ended up going to Venice and sharing the studio with this woman. And, while I was there, I met all these fabulous women who were making their own livings doing the things they loved to do: painting and exhibiting all over the world, making music, writing for magazines and newspapers . . . They were fabulous, and I thought to myself, I want to be like that. It took me ten years from joining that studio, but I finally got divorced, moved to Santa Barbara by myself, and made my own life.

Wow, what a great story. Did you feel like that was your life's purpose, to paint?

I felt as though the arts were my life's purpose—everything was a canvas. I made over homes: I worked for a developer and redesigned model homes for him. I designed pottery in Italy. I painted for many years. And now I'm writing and do photography.

What launched you into deciding to be a writer?

I had just been diagnosed with fourth stage cancer and told I had

two months to live. I was sixty-eight years old at the time. Because of my family's history, I thought that was it.

I had gone to four different doctors who had told me I needed to do very stringent chemotherapy for three weeks at a time, twenty-four hours a day, and that it would make me very sick. Then, when I recovered, I'd need to do a resection on my stomach that would be a very long recovery, and then go back in the hospital for more chemotherapy. They basically said if I didn't do all of that, I wouldn't make it, and that I would have two months to live.

So I said, "No, I'm not doing that." I had heard that there was a writing class at hospice. A woman who was teaching it had just lost her husband to cancer, and everybody who was in the class had cancer. I went to the class, and I thought I'd just write for my children. It was a poetry class. I put pen to paper and I haven't lifted it since.

It was so cathartic, and it turned into my first book, *I Can Do This: Living with Cancer*. The book won a prize at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference. It's out of print right now, but I'm going to reprint it again because I still get so many requests for it.

You followed that up with a second book, *Nana, What's Cancer?* How did that come about?

My granddaughter called me and said, "I want to do a report on your book, but my mom says it's not appropriate for my second grade class because kids my age don't know about cancer." Then she asked me, "Why don't you and I write a book that explains cancer to kids?" This was her idea; she was nine years old.

I said, "I love that idea." I really thought I'd just appease her—that we'd write a little notebook, I'd get it printed up at Kinko's, and we'd call it a book. But, by this time, I was a legislative ambassador at the

American Cancer Society. So, I thought to myself, They have a publishing arm; why don't I take this idea to them? Well, I did. And they loved it. They published the book.

Wow, that's incredible; kids are so amazing. And you're obviously a huge support for your granddaughter in helping her realize her dreams. On the topic of support: When you left your marriage to start a new career and a new life, did you feel like you had a support system for yourself?

Not at all. My friends were all telling me I was crazy. My sister was telling me I was crazy. They all believed that you get married, and you stay married. No matter what. I had a very comfortable life. But it just wasn't about that for me.

I had read all these books—Germaine Greer, *The Women's Room*, Gloria Steinem's books—and they were just firing me up, saying do your own thing. I wanted to do my own thing. And I wanted to make my own decisions.

Since you got remarried, I'm assuming you found someone who appreciates that you're a strong, independent woman. As women, we need to help women. But we also need men who are supportive of us.

That's right. And we really only need the women friends who truly support us. I've noticed that, as I grow older, my circle of friends has gotten smaller—but stronger.

That's interesting. You've actually said, "Certain people aren't supporting my dreams, so I don't need them in my everyday life"?

Yes. That doesn't mean I don't still like them, though.

You still love them from afar—you send them love. But in your everyday circle of life, you're only surrounding yourself with people who support you. I think that's a very important message. That's what this community is. 360 Karma is bringing together women who want to strive to be their highest selves and want to support others in doing so. I find that when I surround myself with people who are genuinely supportive, it helps me achieve what I want to achieve. That's a genuine support system.

Exactly. We give each other ideas, and we all get inspired when we're with each other. We lift each other up.

I totally agree. So how did your life change after being diagnosed with cancer and writing these books?

I just saw things in a whole different way. It sounds corny, and it sounds like something you've heard from many people, but it's so true. Cancer changed my life for the better. It gave me a passion that I never had before. I didn't find my passion until I found out that I had fourth stage metastatic, inoperable cancer.

Let's talk about the cancer for a bit. How did you survive having fourth stage metastatic, inoperable cancer?

I was lucky, and I kept going. My team—who consisted of my kids and my husband—found doctors for me to go to. And the last two doctors I visited ended up teaming together to come up with an experimental treatment for me. This was almost fourteen years ago, by the way.

It was up to me whether I was going to take the treatment or not, and we didn't know whether my tumors were going to shrink or grow as I was taking it. But I have hormone-driven cancer, and these were hormone blockers that they were suggesting. So it made sense to me to try it. I said, "I'm all for the experimental treatment. If you can get it approved by the tumor board, then I'm in."

They got it approved by the tumor board, so we moved forward. It's a shot of Lupron that they give to prostate cancer patients, and it's a pill of Femara that they give to breast cancer patients. Both are approved by the FDA, but they weren't approved together at the time for what I had—that's why it was considered experimental. It was actually just recently approved. I was the first.

What kind of cancer do you have?

Uteral stromal sarcoma. I first had uterine lining cancer, and the cells moved from that and went into my omentum. Now I live with eight tumors—eight large tumors. They don't bother me, and I don't bother them. We just go on and live our lives side by side.

They say positivity affects our DNA and our cells, and that it's a healing factor. In addition to the medical treatment, do you think your positive attitude and your passion for life have helped you survive having cancer?

It definitely has something to do with it. I think you have to be proactive. I think you have to be a co-captain with your doctor. Your doctor has hundreds of patients. You only have one.

Had I been forty-four years old and received this death sentence and had an eight-year-old and a ten-year-old at home, my decision might have been entirely different. I might have said, "I'll do anything it takes, I'll have the chemotherapy, I'll have the operation. . ."

When I made this decision, I was saying to myself, “I’ve lived a good life. I have my grandchildren, I’ve met the love of my life. I’m not going to do anything that’s not going to give me quality of life at this point in my life. I’m not going to put my body and my family through it. So if it works, great. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t.”

Well, it worked. And it gave me a passion to reach out to as many patients that have a serious illness as I can to tell them, “You can help yourself. Do everything it takes.”

I got acupuncture. I went to a nutritionist. I did Pilates. I walked. I changed my diet completely. I exercise every day.

You can help yourself. Plan for the future. Be interested and interesting. Take new classes, start writing, start painting . . . whatever your passion is.

So, if I were to recap, you’re saying to be around people who are supportive and loving. To love those who maybe aren’t on board with you, but don’t keep them in your everyday life. Follow your passion. Do what makes you happy, and give back.

Even before you’re ever diagnosed with anything.

That’s definitely a message I want people to get from this: Don’t wait until you have something horrific happen to wake up and realize that life is fragile and isn’t forever.

Carpe diem. And one more thing about giving back: Helping people who’ve been diagnosed with cancer see that they can live through it and can bring their best selves to the table during the process has made me feel more wonderful than any gift I have ever received in my whole life.

That's exactly where the name of this community, 360 Karma, comes from. I believe that what we give to other people comes back. They say that when you're down and sad, the best thing you can do for yourself is to do something for someone else.

It's true. Give of yourself. It's a wonderful gift.

You're certainly doing that in your life and with your books. Your third book, *Aging in High Heels*, is out now. Tell me about that.

This is my first book that isn't about cancer. For almost fourteen years, I'd been all about cancer. My entire life was cancer. If you ask me what I did, I was a cancer survivor. If you asked me who I was, I was a cancer survivor.

But then it dawned on me that I'm eighty-one now, and I can bring the same thing to the table for aging as I did for cancer. I realized you can be proactive in aging, and not just let aging happen to you. I'm interested in giving back and helping people navigate the aging process. It's the same thing I did with the cancer. At eighty-one, I still feel like a kid. I feel wonderful. That's what I'm doing with this book.

That's a wonderful message to spread. If you're midlife, you actually have a lot to look forward to.

That's right. Don't be afraid to grow older. There are things that happen to us: We get arthritis, we get funny feet, our hearing gets worse. Things happen to us. But we're all in it together—and it's all okay.

We're still having fun, we're still dancing, we're still singing, we're still laughing. It's just okay. If we play our cards right, if we're lucky, we'll very likely live through our nineties. What we want to make sure of is that we're still having a wonderful, important, relevant existence, no matter

how old we are.

That we're still giving back, still making a difference . . .

And still feeling good about ourselves, still following our dreams, and still reinventing our lives. I wanted to write a book about aging and how incredible it is today. We're a groundbreaking generation, my generation: people in their seventies, eighties, and nineties. We're the first in this age group that can run marathons and have same-sex marriages.

I have a friend who just had a ninetieth birthday. He lives all over the world, and he's ninety years old. He's just having the most wonderful time. He's had his shoulder replaced and his knees replaced, but he plays tennis five days a week.

Wow, that's amazing. Thank you so much for writing about this subject and for putting it out into the world. One more question before we wrap up: What advice would you give women about how to find their life's purpose and make it happen?

I would say, open every door that comes to you. Don't be afraid. A lot of people are afraid of failing. But the only way you truly fail is if you don't dip your toe in the water in the first place. Once you dip your toe in the water, you've won.

Don't be afraid to try new things. Don't say, "I've always wanted to do this or that, but I don't know how, or I could fail, or I could be embarrassed." No. The only failing is not trying.

And there's such a reward in trying, isn't there?

There's such a reward. Once you try, you've won. So go for it, really.

Even if it doesn't work out the way you'd hoped, the fact that you've done it, you've won. The outcome is secondary.

One of the mottos in my book is: Dream it, see it, do it. If you dream about something, you see it, and you do it. Don't let anything get in your way. That doesn't mean you have to climb on people or be mean. Just be focused. Follow your dream. Dream it, see it, do it.

That's an important point. Following your dream doesn't mean stepping on other people to get to the top. It means doing it with integrity and helping bring others along with you. Like you said, surround yourself with like-minded people who encourage you to live your dreams. You're one of those people for me, Beverlye.

Thank you so much, Catherine. And you're one of those people for me.

360 Karma, indeed! Thank you so much for talking with me today.

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

FASHION INNOVATOR NIK KACY – TRAILBLAZING ‘UNISEX STYLE’



President, CEO, NiK Kacy Footwear/Creative Innovator and Design Visionary

NiK Kacy

NiK Kacy is founder of NiK Kacy Footwear, a gender-neutral footwear company, which features shoes for everyone—wherever they fall on the gender spectrum. An innovator and design visionary who has been featured in numerous publications, including Fortune, Forbes Magazine, The Huffington Post, Footwear News, SheWired, Autostraddle, Curve and DapperQ, NiK founded NiK Kacy Footwear after mounting a successful Kickstarter campaign, which raised over 134% of its goal through supporters around the globe.

In addition to making gender-equal footwear and accessories, NiK passionately works on projects that make a positive impact in the

LGBTQ community. Their goal is to be able to donate a number of shoes in various styles and sizes to the Los Angeles LGBT Center's Youth Center Community Closet, so that LGBT youth will have access to professional shoes for important events like job interviews and graduation ceremonies.

In their spare time, NiK has also produced and directed a short documentary, *It Does Get Better*, which they hope can help raise awareness for the LGBTQ community and promote visibility and community amongst our brothers, sisters and allies. For more information, visit <http://nikkacy.com>.

I don't know that much about your background, and I'm so interested to hear about it. What was your childhood like?

My childhood was a bit complicated. I was born in Hong Kong and emigrated to the U.S. when I was six or seven. I think I was in third grade when I finally realized my folks were divorced and that was why I hadn't seen my dad in years.

My mom was gone a lot. She had a boyfriend in Hong Kong, so she would leave for long periods of time. At one point, she even moved me next door to this German-Italian family.

I'm not sure how long I lived with them, but I think my mom chose that for me so I could be more immersed in the American culture and learn English faster. I often wonder now if my concept of time was a bit skewed back then. I felt like I lived there for years, but maybe it was only a few months. I can't really say. I just know it made a lasting impression on me.

It was a good experience, despite the trauma of feeling abandoned at first. I remember crying in bed at night the first few weeks. I lived there because I missed my mom so much. But I eventually acclimated and enjoyed my newfound freedom, because they weren't as strict as my own family was.

After a while, I remember moving back home and living with my mom, grandparents, uncle, and aunt. My mom tried her hand at a few jobs, mostly helping family, while I focused on school. She spent her later years taking care of my grandparents and then my little baby cousins.

I went through much of my childhood being confused and depressed, from trying to survive as a non-English-speaking student who was held back a year, to then later jumping a grade after I learned English and having to make new friends all over again.

When I was in sixth grade and back living with my family again, our home was invaded. And that left me with what feels like a lifelong trauma. My grandparents and I were home polishing silverware on a Sunday morning. The doorbell rang, and I looked over the balcony to see who it was.

An Asian delivery guy with a refrigerator box stood there and said there was a delivery for my uncle; my uncle lived on the first floor but wasn't home at the time. And my grandma was surprised because my uncle hadn't said anything about a delivery, but she told me to let him in anyway. So I went downstairs and as I'm opening the door, the guy looked around, and then his hand suddenly slid into the top of the refrigerator box and out came this machete knife.

The moment he looked around, my instincts told me, something's not right. But it all happened in a matter of seconds, and the next thing I knew I was being pushed back inside the building and

thrown against the wall. He taped my mouth and then proceeded to ask me who was upstairs. I remembered being a smartass because, in my mind, I was thinking “Why are you asking me AFTER you taped my mouth?”

So I tried to mumble who was upstairs as two other guys entered the house. They put a gun to my head, a knife to my neck, and they tied my hands behind my back and pushed me up the stairs to our apartment.

By the time we got up to the third floor, I saw my grandma get pushed by one of the robbers. My grandpa, who was in his sixties or seventies, had a heart condition, so my grandma pleaded with the robbers, “Please, be gentle,” and they allowed him to sit down. My baby cousin miraculously didn’t make a peep the entire time. I just kept praying, “Please don’t cry.”

The only one who ended up getting hurt was me, thank goodness. They had me lying on the bed face down while they were rummaging through everything, and I felt them throw drawers on my back. I also ended up with a couple of knife wounds from when they were holding the knife at my back and pushing me up the stairs, as well as a cut on my neck from the initial attack downstairs. I was just so glad nobody else got hurt—it could have been much worse.

My God. How did you process all of that?

I never talked about it very much, until recently as an adult. After the invasion, the school brought in a therapist for me and I went once. It was so unhelpful because I didn’t feel she understood or heard me, so I never went back. And I didn’t seek help from a therapist again for the next thirty-something years.

It wasn’t until I started planning my top surgery that I decided to see a therapist again. I needed to know if I was making the right decision and

wanted to talk to somebody who could help me know my true feelings, that I wasn't just being influenced by society or culture or community.

That was the first time I realized that therapy was a good thing. I'm a big supporter now and have continued to find both comfort and growth in my experience with therapy.

Has it helped you heal from the childhood trauma you experienced?

When I was seeing the therapist for my top surgery, I asked her if she wanted my history. She said, "Sure, if you want to share it." So I told her everything from beginning to end and, as I heard myself saying these experiences out loud, I thought, Damn, I've gone through a lot! Maybe I should keep talking and seeing this therapist.

When I told her my realization, her response was very comforting and reassuring. She never made me feel like I was maladjusted. In fact, she assured me that I seemed very well-adjusted and self-aware. I think some people can self-process and maybe I'm able to do that, but I figured I'd never really know if I didn't go to therapy to find out.

When did you figure out that you were struggling with your gender identity?

There have been many struggles over the years. Around fourth grade, my friend and I were the best female baseball players in school—often competing with the boys in the courtyard. I think at some point there I realized I was different.

I was a tomboy, and I always surrounded myself with the cutest girls and got into fights with boys. I didn't like wearing girls' clothes or playing with dolls or really anything feminine. I remember this one day

when I was walking home from school, singing “sitting in a tree” to my BFF about her and another girl. She freaked out and stormed off. She was so angry and ashamed that I sang that out loud. I think that was the moment I learned two girls liking each other was not okay with society.

Were you thinking you were gay at the time?

I really didn't know about sexuality. I think, inherently, I thought it didn't matter that my best friend was a girl who liked another girl. But her reaction taught me that it wasn't okay and there was something wrong with it. And I don't think I even had a concept of what gender meant at that age. In hindsight, I realize now that my childhood brain was much more advanced than I gave it credit for, because I'm forty years old now and I've only just recently come to terms with the idea that I don't associate or identify with the traditional gender binary.

So you were born a woman but you felt boyish growing up, and this led you to have top surgery to remove your breasts. Now what do you say when people ask you, "Are you a woman, or are you a man?"

I say “both” or “neither.” My identity continues to evolve as I grow and as society and our culture grow. As a woman, I had to learn to embrace my feminine side and learn to embrace being a woman because I thought I had no choice.

In college, I evolved into a butch/boi lesbian and thought that would be enough to feel comfortable in my own skin. It wasn't until I had top surgery and a hysterectomy that I finally felt completely the way I should be. Finding that happiness within, I realized I didn't want to be on hormones or become more masculine than I was.

I think I eventually realized that maybe I just didn't want to fit

into any box. Maybe I can just be me, and I don't need a gender to define who I am.

That's so great, and I bet many of our readers can identify with not wanting to fit into any boxes. Switching gears, I'm curious about your journey out to LA for college. What was that like for you?

I moved to Los Angeles to attend Pepperdine University and study international business. During my second semester, while I was working at the Weisman Museum on campus, a woman came in. She was maybe in her fifties, and she used to be a lawyer. She had left her job five years prior to go back to school and become an artist. She said it was the best decision she had ever made, and she wished she had done it sooner.

I just sat there listening to this woman and felt totally inspired by her wisdom. The thing I really got out of it was, if you love something, don't be afraid to do it.

I loved painting and sculpting so, the next morning, I went to the registrar's office and changed my major to fine arts. And then I called my mom . . . reluctantly. She was not happy about the sudden shift in careers. She made me promise to have a backup plan, so I ended up graduating with a double degree in fine arts and advertising, along with a minor in international communications.

Are sculpting and painting things you're still doing?

I'd love to start painting again, but I'm one of those people who, when I do something, I'm completely committed. I don't want to start until I know I have the capability to finish what I've started. I experienced the same thing with my shoe company. The moment I wanted to do it, I quit my job and took the steps to begin my journey.

You were working at Google when you first had the idea to start the shoe line, correct? How did you end up at Google to begin with, and what did you do there?

I was living in LA and had been working at an ad agency for almost ten years. A former coworker who I'd become very good friends with had moved on to work at Google. They were looking to start a project management department, and she thought of me because of my experience. So they called me up and asked to interview me.

I was excited because, just weeks before that call, I had put out in the universe that I was ready for a new adventure and, if I could work anywhere, where would it be? The answer that came to me was Google.

I love Google—their principle of open source, and using their influence and technology to help make the world a better place. I love everything about Google products. I figured that if I'm going to work for another company, Google is the company I want to work for.

It's interesting isn't it? You put out to the universe, "Hey, I'd like to work for Google." Then you get a phone call saying, "Hey, how would you like to interview at Google?" It's almost uncanny.

Absolutely. I had heard nightmare stories about their interview process: how hard it was to get in, and how some people have had to go through twenty interviews. But my interview process ended up being fun and pleasant—and short. I truly do believe if you put what you want out into the universe, she has a powerful way of giving you the chance to work hard for it and grab it.

Did you feel like you'd hit the jackpot?

Yeah, totally. I was like, "Oh my God. I'm going to have these

amazing benefits. I'm going to work for the best company in the world. I'm going to get paid my worth, and work with some of the brightest people in my industry."

It sounds like it was a dream job.

Yeah, absolutely. Leaving my agency job of nine years was hard but also exciting. I knew that I was going to learn so much and do so many great things.

So I left, and I ended up at Google for three years. It was one of those things where they had hired me to build a department. I wanted to manage, mentor, share my skills, and help teach younger producers to hone in on their skills. That was the plan. They sold me on this position because they were like, "You're the first. You're going to be able to mold it into whatever you want it to be. You get to create your role."

But the harsh reality was that in a big company where there are 38,000 people, the company goes through a lot of reorganizing, and my role kept changing. I went from project manager, to producer . . . It was all fine at first, but then I started to feel like, well, I'm kind of going back to my old role. I came here because I wanted to evolve.

When did you decide to jump ship?

By my third year, my boss and I realized I wasn't going to be doing what I wanted to do, so we discussed my options. He was like, "You want to create a new role? Let's create a new role. You want to find a different department to work in? Let's do that. I will be your reference for anything." They were so supportive.

So, for two weeks, I talked to all the different departments to weigh my options. But I realized they just weren't ready for what I was looking

to do there yet. So then I started wondering, Well, what else do I want to do? What are my other options?

I had dreamt of having top surgery and finally had health insurance to do it. So the first thing on my checklist was to get that done. I had also dreamt of visiting Europe to see all the art and architecture I'd studied in school, so that was next on my list.

Then, I was thinking, Well, if I'm going to go to Europe, I should check out this big shoe fair that's happening there, because I want to see what's going on in the shoe world; I still can't find shoes that fit me. Then I was like, Why don't I learn how to make shoes?

Once I got to that point, I said to myself, Why stop there? Why not make shoes that fit everyone, regardless of gender?

Wow, it sounds like you had an epiphany.

Yes, totally. For the first time in my life, someone gave me an opportunity to envision what I wanted. For twenty years since graduating college, I'd never taken a vacation for fun. I never had money to take a vacation. Also, I was such a workaholic that I worked sixty to eighty hours a week.

So, at that point, I was like, Wow, for the first time I can stop. Let's do this. So I started researching European travel, top surgery, recovery, hysterectomies, shoemaking, the works! Then I started forming my corporation and gave notice at work. They were all so supportive and proud. I really felt very blessed to have so much support.

This was obviously a pivotal moment in your life.

Absolutely. Most people, when they get told, "Hey, we're changing

your role,” their first instinct is, Oh, did I do something wrong?

Instead, I thought, What a great opportunity. I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity to reach my fullest potential. That's something I think that's important to get out of all of this: It's all about perspective.

I look at all of the obstacles I've had in my life, from learning English, to questioning my gender identity and sexual orientation, to post-traumatic stress . . . All of these things are about perspective. I could've held onto the past and let it dictate who I became. But instead, I always kept moving forward and used it as fuel to energize me to be more than I could be.

Have you found support elsewhere?

Absolutely; I've been so blessed. I've built my life in LA for the past twenty years, and it's made up of an incredible family of the most supportive and loving people I've ever met. I'm so grateful all the time for my chosen family here.

I can relate to that!

It's amazing. And meeting you, and all the people we have met inside our community where we just help lift one another, help support one another, and encourage one another to do great things . . . that's what life is all about.

That's what I'm trying to encourage and initiate with 360 Karma. In order for us to rise to where we need to be, we need to help each other. That's what it's all about. I see you as that kind of person, one who helps other people. That's in your fiber.

Yeah, my whole thing is that great things are meant to be shared. Every time I've had something really wonderful by myself, it didn't feel as inspiring as when I had someone to share it with.

Do you get a lot of happiness from giving?

Oh, yeah. That's what it's all about for me.

Me too. And you're giving in a unique way with your shoe line. Tell me a little bit more about that.

Well, the whole concept is that they're shoes for everybody. I've removed gender from the sizing equation because I think society puts too much weight on the traditional gender binary. There's now more visibility within the spectrum of gender and identity, and our fashion and products should represent that.

We all go into the stores and see men's shoes and women's shoes. So you've created a line of non-gender-specific shoes that are for both men and women, not just one or the other?

Exactly. There's a huge department store called Selfridges in London; it's one of the oldest department stores in the world. They were the first ones to remove gender from their stores. They did this whole experiment where they didn't have a men's or women's section. It was just kind of all-gender. I think the future needs to be like that. My shoes may have styles that are embedded in classic "looks" of men's shoes or women's high heels, but they're sized for everyone and aren't separated by gender.

Would you say it's because all people, men and women, have some

degree of femininity and some degree of masculinity? That we're all just people?

Yes, exactly. The point I'm trying to make is that when I look at you, I think, Catherine, amazing human being. I don't think, Catherine, woman first. Gender really has nothing to do with anything. So, when you walk into a store, it shouldn't matter what your gender is. Whatever you want to pick out, you pick out. And they should have your size.

Do you feel like you're tapped into who you are and have found your life's purpose?

What's beautiful about everybody is that we're all really unique. I'm far from perfect: I'm super anal, particular about so many things. I've been told I'm difficult to live with because of these things. But I also think those aren't faults—those are actually my gifts and strengths.

When I make a pair of shoes, it's going to come in very handy that I'm so particular, a perfectionist, and so detailed. Nobody likes to hear what's wrong with everything all the time, so there's a fine line between when to utilize those skills and when not to.

Every day I wake up and I think, How can I be a good human being today? How can I be of service? How can I give something to the world? That's my purpose.

I love that. The shirt you're wearing says, "Be brave. Be authentic." That's you. What's your advice to other people who haven't walked through the fear like you have, and haven't left the corporate job to do their dream business? What's your advice to those people?

You know, I think being fearless is a choice that you make. I feel like part of my purpose is to show people that being brave is possible. It's scary, sure, but it's worth it.

You don't have to always be in mourning, feel like a victim, feel traumatized, or feel left behind or abandoned. You have a choice to say, "Today I'm going to live my life to the fullest, and I'm going to be authentically whom I'm meant to be. And if people can't handle it, that's their problem. I choose to be happy, and that's good with me."

You're very inspiring. I so appreciate you sharing your story and your amazing journey. Thank you so much!

My pleasure. Thank you, Catherine.

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MOVIE PRODUCER BONNIE BRUCKHEIMER –
BREAKING THROUGH IN HOLLYWOOD AS A
WOMAN



Film & TV Producer

Bonnie Bruckheimer

Film and television producer, Bonnie Bruckheimer may not have attended college—but that didn't stop her from making her mark in the Hollywood Entertainment Industry. Serving as Associate Producer on *Big Business*—the hit comedy feature film starring Bette Midler and Lily Tomlin—Bonnie went on to form All Girl Productions with Bette in 1985, and made her debut as Producer on *Beaches*.

As a Producer, Bonnie's many screen credits include: *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (starring Sandra Bullock, Ellen Burstyn, James Garner, Ashley Judd, and Maggie Smith); *Man of the House*; *For the Boys*; and *That Old Feeling*; and she was Co-Producer on *Hocus Pocus*.

For television, Bonnie served as Executive Producer on the Bette Midler HBO concert film, *Diva Las Vegas*, which earned ten Emmy nominations and won three Emmy awards, including “Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Special.” She also served as Executive Producer on the highly rated CBS special television production of *Gypsy*, starring Bette Midler, which won both Emmy and Cable Ace Awards.

In 2011, Bonnie fulfilled a dream when she started teaching “Women in the industry: Career Choices and Challenges” at USC’s School of Cinematic Arts. Her many years of working in film and television continues to help her bring an array of influential, successful, and fascinating guest speakers to her class.

Bonnie has also been involved in numerous charitable organizations, including eight years as National Spokesperson for Cedars-Sinai Research for Women’s Cancers. An animal activist, Bonnie supports a variety of dog and cat rescues. And, in 2008, she became a volunteer grief counselor at Our House-Grief.org, working with teenagers in the process of grieving the death of a parent or parents.

It’s so nice to be here with you.

Catherine Gray—it’s such a pleasure to be here with you as well. Thank you for having me.

I feel like the luckiest woman in the world getting to talk with incredible women like you, so let’s dive right in! There are a lot of women who have dreams of producing movies and being in the entertainment industry, and your story is an amazing one. You

started out as a secretary and went on to become a producer of blockbuster movies like *Big Business*, *Beaches*, *For the Boys*, and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. And you produced many of these movies in partnership with Bette Midler. What was the name of the company you started with her?

All Girl Productions.

All Girl Productions—I love that name. Is that because it was a mostly female group?

It was three women. Bette, myself, and Margaret South, who's a dear friend of mine. Margaret came to our company to look for material and be a development person. Bette asked her what she wanted to do and she said, "I want to produce." So we decided we were going to try to produce, and we were very lucky. Michael Eisner, who was running Paramount at the time, was a big fan of Bette Midler's. He ended up giving us an office and a small deal.

How did you start out in the business?

I'm not one of those people who, their whole life, wanted to be a movie producer. I didn't even know there was such thing as a movie producer. I grew up in Brooklyn. And, when I graduated high school, I had to get a job. I wasn't a great student, so I had absolutely no skills. The only skill I had was being a good typist.

This was back in the day—because you're what, seventy-one now? That's hard to believe.

Yes, it's hard for me to believe, too!

You look amazing, and you're so vibrant and still working. I think that's one of the messages I want to convey to our readers: A lot of the women I'm interviewing are seventy to eighty-plus and are doing amazing work in the world. It's something for younger women to take note of and realize that they'll still be able to be making a difference and thriving late into their sixties, seventies, eighties, even nineties. But let's circle back to your beginnings.

One of my first jobs was working in a company that was in the fashion industry. I filed and typed up orders. Then I ended up getting a job as a secretary to a high-end person, also in the fashion industry.

After that, I got a call from an employment agency that said Columbia Pictures was looking for an executive secretary. I went to interview for the job, and I was in a huge room with the executive secretaries to the president of the company, the vice president, the treasurer—these were all super secretaries. Their whole lives were taking dictation and making appointments for their bosses, and they were completely devoted. I was not one of those girls at all, but I knew I could do the job—and my drive convinced this man to hire me. I didn't have the skills at first. But I ended up learning them from the other secretaries; they taught me everything.

It's interesting because my parents really didn't teach me anything about work, career, or business in general. They were wonderful and loving, but I was taught that when I graduated I was going to meet a nice man and he was going to take care of me. This was back in the fifties.

That was the mentality back then, but there were certain women, like you, who knew they wanted to do more with their lives and made that happen. You walked through the fear of not knowing and put yourself out there anyway, and then you rose to the occasion. That's definitely a recurring theme with the women in this book. So, how did you get from there to producer?

Well, I got married to a man named Jerry Bruckheimer, who ended up being the most successful producer of all time in film and television. He wanted to be a producer from the very beginning.

Jerry worked in advertising in New York and was very, very successful. We were living a very glamorous life in New York City, and then he got an opportunity to be an associate producer on a film in Los Angeles. He said to me, "I'd have to leave this job where I make all this money, and I'll make no money at all. What should we do?"

I was just settling into the good life in New York, with a beautiful apartment on the Upper East Side and renting a house in the Hamptons in the summer. But I thought, easy come, easy go, so I said, "Let's go. You want to do it. Let's go."

We ended up moving out to LA and Columbia said to me, "You're moving to LA; let's get you a job in the studio." And that's what they did.

What kind of job was that?

I worked as a secretary, mostly to producers and directors, and I had a wonderful time doing it. I met fascinating people. I worked on several movies, and then I ended up getting a job as an assistant on *The Rose*.

Were you still married at that time?

No, the marriage had split by then. In order to become the most successful producer in Hollywood, Jerry worked 24/7. I was young, and all I really wanted to do was party, but he was working all the time. He didn't want to go to Hawaii on vacation. He didn't want to go to Palm Springs. He worked. I understood that, but it really wasn't for me. So we went our separate ways and ended up staying very, very good friends afterward.

And how did you end up working on *The Rose*?

Well, I had moved back to New York City and was looking for a job, but there weren't any movies shooting in New York at that time. Then, one day, I read that Mark Rydell—whom I knew—was directing *The Rose*.

I was a big fan of Bette Midler, and I also knew one of the producers from high school, Aaron Russo. So I called Aaron, but he never answered my call. Then Mark offered to introduce me to Marvin Worth, who was one of the other producers of the movie.

Marvin ended up coming to meet me in New York and asked if I wanted to work as his assistant. I said yes, and that's how it happened.

Is *The Rose* how you ended up meeting Bette?

Yes, I met her the first day of shooting; there was a party after we wrapped. And I was completely blown away by her performance that day—it was her first movie.

So I saw her at the party, and I went over to her and said, "My name is Bonnie, and I'm working as Marvin Worth's assistant. I just want

to tell you I watched you in your scene today, and you were unbelievable.”

She turned around and gave me the meanest look I have ever gotten from anybody. As if to say, Who are you, and why are you talking to me? That was exactly the look she gave me. It was terrible for me.

I’m curious to know how you become partners after that.

Well, at one point, Aaron asked Marvin if he could share me as an assistant because he didn’t have one in New York at that time. Aaron was Bette Midler’s manager, and he was producing the movie because of Bette. Marvin wanted to get along well with Aaron, who had a very dynamic personality, so he said, “Okay, she can work for both of us.”

The next day, Aaron told me he needed me to come with him to the set, but Marvin had asked me to do some things for him. They had a back-and-forth. And, needless to say, after about a week, Marvin got himself a new assistant, and Aaron kept me on.

I stayed in New York for the whole shooting of the movie. And, when the movie was over, Aaron said to me, “I want you to come back to LA and work for me there.” I said, “Well, I just spent two thousand dollars that I didn’t have to move to New York, so I can’t really spend the money to move back to LA.” He said, “We’ll pay for you to move back.” So that’s what I did.

After *The Rose*, Aaron and Bette parted ways. They had a very tumultuous relationship. In seven years, he took her from obscurity to being a major star, so she was always very grateful to him, but they clashed terribly and she fired him as her manager.

After that, she called me up and said, “Will you come to my

house this weekend? I want to offer you a job.” By that time, obviously, we had started getting along much better. I didn’t really want to be an assistant to a celebrity—I had no interest in that. But, as the saying goes, she made me an offer I couldn’t refuse; it was more money than I’d ever made.

So, the next day, I showed up at her house in Beverly Hills with my dog, who I took everywhere. She knew that I had the dog on the set every day on *The Rose*, and she didn’t like it. So, when I showed up at the house with the dog, she looked down at her, and I just stood there and said, “She comes with me.” Needless to say, Bette agreed—and that started a twenty-two-year partnership.

How did you go from being her assistant to being her partner?

I started as her assistant, but because she didn’t have a manager, I started taking on a lot more responsibility.

Who suggested the partnership, you or her?

Well, we starting calling me her associate, instead of her assistant, because I was doing more and more. The longer story is, she was nominated for *The Rose* but wasn’t getting any parts. It was like they were thinking that kind of part was all she could play. She was very frustrated. So I said, “We should find our own material for you.”

Iris Rainer Dart, who was Iris Rainer at the time, had written a twelve-page treatment for a book called *Beaches*. We had a mutual friend who called me up one day and said, “You have to meet my friend Iris. She’s writing this book called *Beaches*, and she has Bette Midler in mind to play the lead. Will you read it?” So I agreed to read it, and I just sat there with tears running down my face the entire time—it was such an amazing story.

We ended up working on it with Iris, and we hired Margaret South to find additional material and be a development person. Margaret was actually the first one who said, “I want to produce.”

So Bette said, “Great, you can produce if you find something.” But I was sitting there like, Are you kidding me? I’ve been working with you, doing this for five years, and Margaret’s going to produce? We ended up having a big powwow about it and eventually decided to form All Girl Productions to produce together.

It’s always so interesting how life unravels, isn’t it?

It is, yes. I didn’t have the nerve to say I wanted to produce back then. I had trouble asking for raises, too. I was always afraid that if I asked for something, I’d get fired. Nobody taught me it was okay to ask for what you wanted. I didn’t know my own worth.

Do you know it today?

I still struggle in some areas. I have a brand-new career as a college professor and I still struggle, but certainly not to the degree that I did. Also, I recently went through a near-death experience that has definitely given me a new perspective on that.

Oh my goodness, you almost died? What happened?

Well, in June of 2015, I was on a vacation hiking with my best friends in Sun Valley, Idaho, where one of them lived, and I was stricken with a sepsis infection, which is basically a blood infection. Before this, I’d never been seriously sick or hospitalized, except for an appendix operation many years prior.

So I was taken to the emergency room in Sun Valley with a sepsis infection, and they put me under for two days while they zapped

the sepsis out of my body. And they told me that had I not taken such good care of myself by eating well, exercising, not smoking, and not drinking, I wouldn't have made it through the infection. And then, on top of that, after the sepsis cleared, I ended up getting a staph infection. I didn't leave my house for five months.

I had never been so sick in all my life, and it changed everything for me. The idea that something could happen out of the clear blue sky—so unexpectedly—made me look at everything I do and say, What a gift each day is. I just have a whole new appreciation for life, and I also have a strong desire now for a sense of meaning and purpose in my career.

Wow, what a powerful and pivotal moment; I'd love to hear more about this idea of purpose and meaning in your work. Can you talk a little about how you transitioned from producing to teaching?

Sure. After the production company closed, I had enough money to live comfortably, and I really wanted to start giving back. I was thinking about teaching at the time but hadn't taken any steps toward it yet. And then a therapist friend of mine said, "We should start a women's support group to help people figure out what's next in their careers. I'll be the facilitator, and you know everybody so you can help recruit women to be in it."

I ended up inviting women who live in the area where I live. They were all in their late forties, fifties, and sixties, and it seemed like they were being what I call "aged out of their jobs"—like people in the business thinking a fifty-year-old woman can't write comedy anymore. They were being aged out, but they still had plenty of energy. So the whole basis of the group was focusing on the question "what do I do now?"

I used to have this Bruce Springsteen song that stayed in my head called "Glory Days." It's about a football player who peaked in high school and never excelled in anything ever again. I didn't want my glory

days to be producing movies and nothing ever again. I never want to be the person who says, “I used to do this, and I used to do that.” I want to be a person who’s saying, “This is what I’m doing now.”

So, in the group, we all went around and talked about what we could do with the skills we had, and we talked about how we could motivate ourselves to do something different. I realized I could never make the money that I made producing movies, but I could teach. And that would give me a sense of gratification—something my children could be proud of me for doing. That was my motivation for pursuing it.

Teaching is such a wonderful way to give back. How did you end up at USC?

I first went to UCLA Extension, and they offered me a job. The problem was, the class ended at 11 o’clock at night, and I knew I’d be dragging that late, so it didn’t work for me.

At that point, I just started calling everybody I knew who had anything to do with academia and said, “Who do you know who I could meet about teaching?” I didn’t have any idea what I wanted to teach, but I knew I wanted to teach something that had to do with women, women’s empowerment, and women’s studies. Long story short: The amazing Marty Kaplan, who runs Norman Lear’s organization at USC, opened a door for me at USC, and I ended up getting a job teaching there.

What’s the name of your class?

My class is called The History of Women in Film: Career Choices and Challenges for Women. The beginning of the class is about the history, and we read about women directors and producers who started out in the industry in the 1920s and ’30s. Then we segue into what are your choices and what are your challenges as far as being a

cinematographer, as far as being a director?

At first I started to get all the statistics together about how few women actually make it as directors, etcetera. But, after meeting all my students, I just thought, You know what? I'm not telling them these statistics. They've read about them, they've heard about them. I'm only going to tell them positive things. I'm only going to encourage them. Teaching is so rewarding. It's just amazing.

I love that. How long have you been doing this now?

I'm starting my sixth year in August, and I'm more proud of this than anything I've ever done. It's funny because these days, I'm not calling people to ask, "Will you read this script I have?" I'm calling them to ask, "Do you want to come down and speak to my class at USC film school?" I bring a lot of Academy Award winners whom I know into the class to speak, and everybody says yes.

Teaching is such a great way to give back. In addition to teaching, you're also a volunteer grief counselor, correct?

Yes, I've been a volunteer grief counselor for seven years at Our House, a nonprofit grief counseling organization. I work with teenagers who've had a parent die.

I've gone from a very successful and meaningful career as a producer to doing things that give me so much satisfaction and pride. I'm no longer Bonnie Bruckheimer "the producer," but I still feel relevant.

Thinking back now about what I went through when I was younger—my lack of confidence and not thinking I could "be" anything—I realize how I've come a long way. I didn't grow up in a world where they said, "You could be president of the United States

some day.” And please, God, in my lifetime—that’s what I want to see for women.

I agree—more and more women need to be running for political office in this country. So here’s to a great future of women leaders like yourself who are impacting and influencing other women to trail-blaze! Thank you so much for sharing your story.

My pleasure, Catherine. Thank you for having me!

CATHERINE GRAY

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

After interviewing these extraordinary women, and so many others like them on my Live Love Thrive talk show, I have concluded that these four traits seem to be something they had in common in the journey of empowering themselves:

Fearlessness- It was not that they were not fearful- it was that they did it anyway. For example, my dear friend Julia Stoddard was sexually abused from the time she was approximately 5 until she was 17. Because she spoke up to the police, that perpetrator is now in prison for life. She went through grueling and painful court hearings. And it wasn't that she was any stronger than anyone else, but it was that she cared enough about not having her younger sister or other women sexually molested by this man that she stepped forward. Most abused women do not speak up, and thus why these cycles continue. This woman was truly a bold woman, and said achieving this victory helped empower her. She is now a champion and voice for women, children and men who have bravely survived sexual abuse.

Courage! As you know, another woman I interviewed, Beverlye Hyman Fead, was given two months to live with stage four cancer. That was 14 years ago and now she has written 3 books. She took the courageous path of trying a new test medicine, instead of the traditional path. It was a bold move. Now she is still here thriving, and is an Author and Speaker around the country and in Washington, DC talking about the Silver Tsunami and how preventative steps will keep baby boomers alive longer. This in turn will save the country billions. She is also a thriving artist and photographer, which brings me to my next trait.

Passion-Each one of the women I interviewed mentioned this. They did not settle- they did their passion and their calling no matter what. One such woman I spoke to spent 10 years as a secretary, while writing every night! She was determined to be a writer. And after 10 years, she had saved up enough money to try being a full time writer for a year- and became a head writer on one the most successful TV series in history. That person is Ann Donahue, Executive Producer of the CSI series. It

took perseverance- and her passion drove that. Her advice is, do what you love, no matter what!

Giving back-If women are going to rise up into more positions of influence to make the world a better place in all areas of concern- environment, animal rights, peace, sex trafficking, and more, then more women are going to need to help each other. Each of the successful women I talked to believes in giving back and helping other women. If you are a successful woman, mentor others and bring them with you. If you are reaching for your life's passion, reach out to other women in that industry and ask them for help.

I have always loved the saying “ The best way to get what you want is to help others get what they want”

Ladies... Walk through your fears, Be Courageous, Live your Passion, and by all means Give Back!

We need to encourage women to step into their calling, their passion, their life's purpose... such as being a politician, a CEO, a writer- or whatever the dream may be. It really comes down to women embracing these traits that are found amongst the most trailblazing women on the planet- and implementing them into our lives through education, meditation, and networking with like-minded women.

If you saw the movie the Suffragettes, then you know what generations of women before us went through simply for us to have the right to vote. Some of them were killed. Many suffered violence, oppression and sexual harassment- but they forged on for us to win the right. And now that we have our autonomy as women, we owe it to them and to all our sisters around the world, and to future generations to step in to our power and our gifts that help make the world a better place.

We must embrace an ideology of women helping other women, which strengthens our road to equality.

There are still qualified women today- who bring a lot of feminine insight to situations, that are being passed over for advancement because they are women, and the world suffers because of it. Many women I know never followed their dreams because our culture said women can't

LIVE, LOVE, THRIVE

do this job or that job. And then other women I know who started out in “traditional women’s jobs”, such as secretaries, held true to their passion and vision, and had other women cheering them on saying you can do this- and those are the women that were able to manifest their dreams. Supporting each other does make a difference. Slowly but surely the paradigm is shifting. The time is now for us to forge ahead with this women helping women mindset.

As a documentarian, I love creating projects that evoke change and empower people to use their gifts to make a difference. The amazing women I have interviewed for this book have all overcome challenges and hardships and gone on to do meaningful and trailblazing work in the world. These women aren’t just talking the talk—they are walking the walk. And they are an inspiration for us all to do the same!

My hope is that these stories will inspire you to live your highest potential and know not there is nothing you cannot do- if you feel inside yourself- the desire to live out loud.

If you are inspired by these women’s stories- start to put your focus on finding your own Life’s purpose so you can manifest your own legacy. We all have gifts we need to share in order to live an authentic life and truly make a difference. Most of the time, we find that purpose from the challenges and tragedies in our life, that end up sending us on our life’s calling. When we are doing what we are passionate about, and living in alignment with our purpose- life flows with ease and joy- even in the tough times. Most importantly remember that you are not in this alone. There is a community of women to support your endeavors and dreams- find them and align with them.

Bringing about women’s empowerment is important to both men and women- and to the future of the world’s well- being for generations to come. The goal is to create a paradigm shift of women across the spectrum helping other women to succeed and to LIVE, LOVE and THRIVE. Catherine calls this the “Bold Girls’ Club” – an old boys’ club for 21st century women!.

The time for women to empower each other is now! Creating a Bold Girl’s Club ideology is imperative to the future of our humanity! And as I found here in LA and with our 360 Karma community- we truly are

stronger together. And the best way to get what you want to manifest is to help others get what they need. Go out and help someone today- and align with your like-minded community of women.

As our famous past Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once said- there is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women!

As the stories in this book illustrate, the challenges and tragedies we face in our lives can end up sending us on the path of our true calling. And we don't have to walk this path alone!

Research shows the happiest people are the ones with community. So the best place to start is by going out into the world, joining groups and giving back. This will help you connect with similarly aligned people and help boost the quantum physics manifestation of 360 karma in your life.

Join women's empowerment and networking groups, vote to support candidates and policies that support women's issues, donate your time and/or money to organizations that help women . . . and give the world the gift of your authentic self. The karmic reward is so gratifying!

Visit 360karma.com to join our community of women helping women.

YOU CAN ALSO FIND US ON FACEBOOK
([FACEBOOK.COM/360KARMAWOMEN](https://www.facebook.com/360KARMAWOMEN)) AND TWITTER
([TWITTER.COM/360KARMAWOMEN](https://twitter.com/360KARMAWOMEN)).

LIVE, LOVE, THRIVE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Founder of newly launched 360 Karma Productions, Catherine Gray, is a trailblazing producer/speaker/author with over two decades of experience producing and directing many award-winning documentaries that have aired on PBS, and other cable networks. She is currently working on projects that evoke change, and empower women to use their gifts to have a positive impact on the world.

Her current focus is the "Live Love Thrive" Radio/TV Talk show- and book were created to showcase extraordinary women, who against the odds, have been triumphant and successful in manifesting their life's purpose.

Among the award-winning films Catherine has produced and directed is the ground-breaking feature documentary about gay marriage, "I Can't Marry You," narrated by Betty DeGeneres, which aired on PBS, was distributed on Amazon and on all major online retailers. The film was screened at film festivals around the world, has many thousands of views on Facebook and is housed in history archives at LGBT centers, colleges and universities nationwide.

Catherine also co-produced award winning documentaries for LOGO including "Laughing Matters More", The Men of Laughing Matters, and Kate Clinton 25th Anniversary- along with others such as Millionaires True Stories.

Ms. Gray is also a dynamic speaker- and speaks at events and conferences such as the West Hollywood Women's Leadership Conference, workshops and various events around the country.

She has been a trailblazer in producing and directing the first ever gay TV show to air in the U.S. in Miami in 1989 called Way Off Broadway, and worked as Vice President of Advertising for the first gay cable network called C1TV- also based in Miami. She also worked in New York city for Rainbow Media- Director of Direct Response Advertising for Bravo and AMC Networks. And has been an entrepreneur all her life- including a start up in California called Corp Shorts- which was the first corporate internet shorts video production company in Los Angeles. Her career began in cable television advertising, where she was the top

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account executive in the country- bringing in millions in her decade long career for TCI Media Services, and then AT&T Media- while producing and hosting her own TV Show called “Hello South Florida”.

She is also the Founder of LOL, Ladies of LA, a popular women’s group with events that connect extraordinary women to make a difference. And resides as Vice President on the Board of the LAGLCC.

Catherine’s vision can be summed up by a favorite quote:
"Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in complete harmony." – Mahatma Gandhi

www.360Karma.com