

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', which is part of a larger graphic element consisting of two curved lines that sweep upwards and outwards, resembling a checkmark or a path.

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

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!

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.

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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 started 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!