

7

GETTING BACK UP

Managing Crises along the Journey

Introduction

Things sometimes go wrong. Sometimes, they go very wrong. Robert Collier, an early twentieth-century self-help author, in *Riches Within Your Reach!* noted: “Sooner or later comes a crisis in our affairs, and how we meet it determines our future happiness and success.”¹ An internet search reveals that Henry Kissinger clearly noted that “there can’t be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full.”² Lawyers can generally relate to Kissinger’s notion of busy weeks and not being able to handle any more crises. Crises come in many forms, however, and do not arrive on schedule.

In these essays, lawyers share some challenges in their lives and explain how they reestablished lives of balance, conquered alcoholism, coped with illnesses such as brain tumors or kidney stones, dealt with job loss or teen pregnancy, and found their

-
1. Robert Collier, *RICHES WITHIN YOUR REACH!* (TarcherPerigee 1947).
 2. Henry Kissinger, *THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE* (June 1, 1969).

spirituality. These women faced challenges and handled them with grace, integrating their personal and professional goals with their values when their careers unexpectedly skidded off track. We hope you are inspired and find your own courage in these stories, as we will all inevitably face challenges over the course of our careers.

Becoming an Alcoholic in Private, Living in Recovery in Public



Her Story

Hon. Sarah L. Krauss (Ret.)

Career

Retired judge of the New York City Courts, presently under contract as an outreach consultant for the New York State Bar Association Lawyers Assistance Program.

Education

Wayne State University Law School, JD.

Best Advice

Pick a career path that gives you not only a sense of pleasure and accomplishment but also one with good mentors and real autonomy.

Personal

Married to my sweetheart from law school after forty years apart. My daughter is a veterinarian technician in northern California and has been happily married for twenty-eight years.

After years of drinking, I stood on the cusp of losing all the gains I had made in my legal studies and chosen career in government service. With the assistance of friends and relatives already in recovery, my life took a better turn as I got sober and began a recovery process that has held me in good stead for more than thirty-three years. At a certain point in the recovery process, I came to the realization that staying anonymous in the legal community was not going to be very helpful to the lawyers and judges, the law students and their family members, who might benefit from hearing a story of recovery just as I had. This essay is the story behind that process.

My Path from Addiction to Recovery

Until that turning point, my life was on a steady decline. This decline began slowly and progressed insidiously. Over time and probably without much notice, I began drinking more and more. At one time, I could drink with friends on a Friday night and maybe even on a Saturday night, but by Monday I would be back into my responsible mode. Then, slowly, the weekend drinking increased and began to creep into weeknights, and eventually I found myself drinking during the day, especially when my responsibilities—law school, studying, single parenting, and showing up for work—became overwhelming.

I had married very young and had a child, but I was determined to get an education and make something of my life. As young marriages often do, mine began to unravel. Curiously, as my marriage deteriorated, I found I had a desire to achieve, in part because I knew I would have to take care of myself and my young daughter on my own. As my marriage ended, I worked full time in the court system while attending law school at night. In the short span of five years, I had transformed myself from a young dependent housewife into a disciplined, motivated superwoman. I could do anything!

Regardless of my desire to achieve, I continued to drink. The drinking subtly became a more important part of my days than I realized. I drank to relieve the stress of working, studying, class attendance, and child care. The problems such drinking created

seemed to pale in comparison to the story I told myself. I was a single working mother who planned to join a noble profession—I was going to be a lawyer. I was on the ladder up, a trailblazer, a woman on fire, a successful woman in the seventies.

For certain, my relationships with family and friends became strained and, as time wore on and the drinking took over more of my life, necessary relationships with family and employers were, to say the least, no longer cohesive and were often chaotic.

People could not depend on me to show up in a responsible and timely manner. My work and studies began to show a steady decline. Like many with this problem, I was unaware of the damage drinking was doing to my life and relationships.

I found many reasons to blame circumstances and others for needing to drink: for relief, for relaxation, to reduce the stress and fear I was feeling. Through this false sense that I was all right and could handle the drinking and everything else, I couldn't see the toll my behavior was taking on my family or work responsibilities. At the time, I thought I was handling all of these responsibilities well.

My life plans underwent a radical change owing to the end of a cherished relationship related to the excessive drinking and the perception that it was other people's fault that I was so unhappy. I graduated from law school and moved to a new city. I had a variety of legal jobs there. I made new friends. I had a new boyfriend and a renewed relationship with my daughter. With the new situation, I had hoped that this time I would be able to control when and how much I drank.

That didn't happen, and I began to recognize that my drinking was out of control. The only thing I thought about throughout the days at work and nights partying or at home was my next drink. As more people told me that I could have a problem with drinking, I stopped drinking in public. I preferred to spend evenings alone in the privacy of my home where I could drink without facing the consequences of blackouts or unruly emotional outbursts. I felt safer there because I was afraid of where I might end up in a blackout.

By then, I was having a hard time focusing, making good decisions, getting to work on time, or even taking proper care of myself

or anyone else. I was unable even to pay attention to my now young teenage daughter. The consequences of failed relationships and now unmanageable responsibilities piled up and became a mountain too high to climb. Unfortunately, this provided many reasons (although not rational ones) to continue drinking.

Increasingly, the shame and fear became overwhelming. Soon I began to have bouts of believing that I'd be better off dead. During my darkest hours of failed relationships, chaotic life circumstances, and uncontrolled drinking, I did attempt to end my life. Fortunately, those attempts were not successful.

Friends began to talk to me about the excessive drinking and my erratic behaviors, offering suggestions for help. Seeing a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and taking prescribed antidepressants did not have any effect on the drinking. Many attempts at getting sober—stopping drinking for long periods but using other substances to “take the edge off”—resulted in progressively more unmanageability in my life. After some improvement when I had first stopped drinking, the use of drugs began to take its toll. Again I found myself in a morass of unpredictable chaos, and my work and relationships began unraveling again.

Perhaps because the consequences were too much to face, the guilt too much to bear, or death too frightening to stomach, when I heard someone speak of recovery it stirred something deep inside. Miraculously, I was able to not only hear the message but to surrender to the possibility of sobriety and recovery. This provided the opportunity to change the destructive course I was on and opened up a whole new life to me. A period of detoxification and rehabilitation treatment followed this surrender, and I began to walk a different path. This initial period of sobriety was followed by intensive years of attendance at support groups and a sustained period of sobriety while working with others, both in and outside the legal profession.

My Role as a Messenger to the Bar

About twelve years into recovery, I wrote my story for the *ABA Journal*. With that publication, I willingly surrendered my anonymity to assist my colleagues who were dealing with the disease of addiction. The decision to reveal the details of my own alcoholism and recovery was not an easy one. Some of the ramifications were

difficult to deal with, but I do not regret my decision for one moment. After all, those who had the courage to tell their story had brought me to recovery and saved my life. How could I not do the same in hopes that I might help someone in return?

The extreme shame and stigma experienced by lawyers, judges, and law students created a critical urgency to put a face to the problem—my face. I was also acutely aware of the role a demanding profession played in this disease.

With the gift of hindsight, I share highlights of my journey as a messenger of recovery. Sharing serves to keep my sobriety strong and may influence those who are at that crossroad of revealing their condition or in the middle of a substance abuse experience and need a word of encouragement and hope.

In 1994, I became a commissioner with the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs¹ (CoLAP) through the encouragement of another attorney in long-term recovery who was active in CoLAP. It was because of this commission appointment that I first publicly shared my story of addiction and recovery to a group of my peers.

I agreed to speak to a roomful of women bar leaders about CoLAP. It was a last-minute decision, and I was left with little time to prepare. I quickly realized that sharing my story would ultimately be the best way to educate them about CoLAP's mission. I would have to reveal to them that I was an alcoholic. This decision gave me pause, especially when I saw many of my New York State colleagues in the audience, but I knew it was important to show them what a lawyer and a judge in recovery looked like: healthy and successful. Who better to deliver this message? I was one of them, a bar leader who had just completed a year as the vice president of the Women's Bar Association of the State of New York and had previously served as the president of my county women's bar association, but different, possibly, because I had overcome the challenge of active alcoholism and had remained in the legal profession and was now willing to talk about my struggles with this disease.

It was following this presentation that I wrote my *ABA Journal* article. A few years later, I shared my story with the Board of Trustees of the Brooklyn Bar Association and participated in a

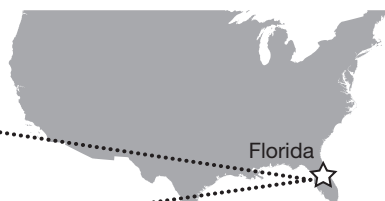
1. See http://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance.html.

mock intervention for New York administrative judges as well as the Executive Committee of the New York State Bar Association. All of this put my private story on public display but served a critical purpose of demonstrating that recovery works.

Since finding sobriety and then finding the courage to share my story of recovery with those in the legal profession, much has changed with regard to the universal message to legal professionals about addiction and the incidence of mental health issues in our profession. Today all lawyer assistance programs offer education on how to recognize and intervene when someone is impaired. These educational programs continue to be offered for free or for a very low cost on subjects related to mental illness, addiction, and lawyer well-being. The assistance that the state lawyers' assistance programs offer is also free and confidential.

Personally, sobriety afforded me the privilege to serve for more than seventeen years as a judge in the Civil, Criminal, Supreme, and Family Courts of New York City. In addition, I had the honor of serving on CoLAP as chair of the Judicial Assistance Initiative and, later, as the overall chair of CoLAP. Volunteer work on state and local lawyers-helping-lawyers committees and on behalf of my colleagues became critical to my own well-being and gave me an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of the lawyer assistance program development throughout the United States. There are many courageous judges, lawyers, and law students among us who are not only in recovery but have also lent their time and energy to this effort, who have publicly acknowledged their struggles with addiction and mental health problems, and who have maintained their recovery while contributing their formidable skills and talents to the legal profession. The willingness to admit what has happened to us while continuing to demonstrate, through our own professional accomplishments, that a recovering attorney is a responsible member of the profession, as well as the willingness to volunteer to educate our colleagues, has done much to reduce the stigma of addiction and mental illness for judges, lawyers, and law students. But more important, we are able to get effective assistance to those who are suffering and dying every day from these very treatable illnesses.

Reestablishing a Life of Balance



Her Story

Mayanne Downs

Career

As of September 1, 2016, I became president and managing director at GrayRobinson, practicing commercial litigation, appellate law, and high-stakes domestic matters.

Education

University of Florida, BA; University of Florida College of Law, JD.

Best Advice

For someone interested in pursuing a leadership role, my advice is volunteer, volunteer, volunteer. There's always nonbillable work to be done. Do it, do it well, and become indispensable.

Personal

Two children, Barry, a musician in Nashville, and Savannah, a law student at the University of Florida.

For more information about Mayanne

www.gray-robinson.com

It took a health crisis, a near-death experience, and a coma to focus my attention on the importance of a balanced life. It was a critically important lesson, and I'll never forget it. It changed me in a fundamental way.

The entire episode started as a fairly routine medical problem—a kidney stone, something that happens to about thirteen percent of men and seven percent of women at some point in their lives. Smaller stones usually resolve without treatment; larger ones may need to be broken up with shock waves or removed surgically.

My kidney stone, however, turned out to be a little more stubborn than that. It got stuck and would not move, which led to sepsis, a severe bacterial infection of the bloodstream. In quick succession, I ended up in the hospital, then in the intensive care unit, and ultimately in a medically induced coma. Doctors told my family that I only had a twenty-five percent chance of survival. I survived, but the experience profoundly changed my life and the way I think about nearly everything. It made me realize just how unbalanced my life had become.

“Well, of course it changed you,” you may think. “You probably had some very serious bargaining sessions with the Almighty. ‘Get me out of this one, and I’ll live a better life, I promise.’” But the truth of the matter is that I was blissfully unaware of the precariousness of my position. In fact, I was unaware of everything. My family, friends, and colleagues may have been anxiously gathered around my bedside, but I was in la la land for much of my seventeen-day ICU stay. In a way, the consequences of my illness were visited upon everyone but me. I did not get to experience them until later.

That is when I learned what the whole experience had meant. Not so much to me, really, but to the others in my life—my family, of course, and those people close to me, but also to many others who were on the fringes of my existence. People who did not really have much reason to care so deeply about what had happened to me, but who did anyway.

It was their stories that made me pause and think about how I had been living my life. During my lengthy recovery period and even to this day, it has been those stories that have dominated my thinking. Here are a few of them.

- Family members, friends, and colleagues gathered around my bed while I was in the hospital. Many of them, of different faiths, prayed for my recovery. Evangelicals, Episcopalians, Jewish Kabbalah, and spiritual healers were all there praying. Even a Reiki master laid on healing hands. At times, there were so many people at my bedside that the overflow had to gather in a nearby conference room.
- While I was in a medically induced coma, my colleagues on the Florida Bar Board of Governors gathered for a dinner in Tampa with their spouses. Robyn Sasso, wife of Governor Andy Sasso of Clearwater, passed out knitting needles and gave some fast knitting instructions. Then they all prayed as they worked together on a prayer shawl for me. When I left the hospital after my seventeen-day stay, that prayer shawl was wrapped tightly around my shoulders.
- A lobbyist thought it would cheer me up if she organized a manicure event in my room, and she invited a number of people to come by with different nail polishes. The nurses would not let them in, but I loved the idea. It still brings a smile to my face when I think about it.
- A young girl, developmentally disabled, drew me a picture that was hanging on the wall in my hospital room when I awoke from the coma.

When I regained consciousness, I discovered that people I had never met had been involved in my recovery as well. As time went by, I met people who told me that I was on the prayer list at their church, or that they had organized people to pray for my recovery. I am not a traditionally religious person, but those stories had a great impact on me.

The stories I heard about the impact my illness had on others made me do quite a lot of reexamining. The experience caused me to look back on my childhood, on those who raised me, on the things that had happened to me over the years, and to put them in an entirely new perspective.

Recovery was a time of great reflection because I could not do much else. After getting home from the hospital, the first thing I realized was that I could not navigate the three steps leading up to

my house—I was not physically strong enough. I felt weak and tired and did not do much of anything except rest. My long period of rest gave me plenty of time to think about life and how grateful I was to be alive. I thought about how I could live my life better, and how I could share my experience with others.

I always believed life was important and had meaning, but I began to see life in an entirely new light once I realized that I had come very close to losing something so incredibly valuable. My illness turned out to be a great opportunity to learn. Some things I had learned from my father many years earlier helped with that. He was very focused on approaching life by challenging assumptions, and he worked hard to understand and analyze and observe the things around him. He was a real maverick in the way he thought about things.

My father was a very attentive parent and not just in the traditional ways. A couple of times a month I would wake up to find a piece of paper on my bed with a picture drawn on it. That picture would lead me someplace else where I would find another paper with another picture. Then there would be another, and another. He loved to design these “treasure hunts without words.” They were always designed to teach me to think. I would believe that I had figured out some great truth without realizing that that was exactly what he was trying to teach me. From him, I learned to think about things a little differently. And that gift from him—the ability to think critically and in a solution-driven way—helped me to understand what my illness had really been about, what life should really be about, and what changes I needed to make in my life to benefit from those lessons and ultimately lead a more balanced life.

Lesson 1: Life Isn't Just About You!

I'm not going to tell you that I did not think about myself and about what had happened to me once I came out of my coma. But what I really thought more about was all those other people who had been affected by my illness and my near-death experience—the shawl-knitters, the picture-drawers, and the people who prayed for me. I thought about my family members, and what life could

have been like for my son and daughter. I thought about my colleagues, my law clients, and even about the strangers I might have been able to help somewhere down the road. What I learned was not to minimize the impact you have on others.

Lesson 2: Life Isn't Just About Work

My relationships now are much different than they were before my illness. In fact, my pre-2007 life is different from my post-2007 life. Work always used to come first; now people and relationships do. In the past, whenever I had thought about self-improvement, I had thought mostly about improving myself professionally—going to school, reaching this or that professional milestone, adding more letters after my name. I have to say that since my illness I think very little about those things. Now I spend a lot more time and energy thinking about relationships, loved ones, friendships, and about people who might benefit from my time or help. The nonfamily things I do I commit to only if I love it and believe the work will make a difference.

Now, don't get the wrong message; I still love my work, love the law, and believe that much of my ability to help others comes from my legal training and experience. Work did not become unimportant or meaningless; it simply has assumed a somewhat different place in my perspective.

In fact, one of the things I learned from my illness is just how amazing the profession of law really is. Every profession is special in its own way, but the law provides assistance to others in a very interesting way. It provides professional and personal service that is unparalleled. Go to any community and start looking at all the local charities and public activities that are taking place, and I guarantee you will find lawyers deeply involved in all of them.

But time has to be set aside for other important things. There has to be time for family and friends; there has to be time for reflection. Living a good life means participating, not standing on the sidelines. There is a yin and yang that is important to successful living and that is the very essence of a balanced life: "balanced" should never mean giving up one for the other.

Lesson 3: Don't Be Afraid to Love or to Be Vulnerable

When we grow up and reach a certain age, or we experience something eye-opening and important for the first time, we may feel uncomfortable when we recognize our vulnerability. Young people have a very definite sense of invulnerability, a belief that bad things happen only to others. In that same way, we do not like to believe that bad things can happen at random. But my near-death experience was a random thing that could have happened to anyone.

Like a lot of people, I used to believe that stoicism was a virtue in times of trouble or pain. But ultimately stoicism does not work. The answer to vulnerability is not stoicism, but love—the kind of love that others showered upon me when I was near death.

My pre-2007 self was very emotionally distant. I did not like huggers, and I was made uncomfortable by open displays of affection. My post-2007 self understands that love is more important than all that, and I make a constant effort to get over my natural reserve. It is not always easy, but I try.

Lesson 4: There Is Value in Routine

Why do people clean out their closets when they are feeling stressed? It is a way to apply order to a place where there was none. It is an exercise in healing. Routine can also satisfy the need for order when recuperating from a traumatic event or health issue.

I tell my children that there can be value in saying you are sorry even if you do not entirely mean it, because those words have a healing power of their own. In the same fashion, I think there is healing power in getting back to your routine even if a part of you is not ready for it. If you find difficulty in walking, just put one foot in front of the other; before you know it, you will be walking again.

One thing I still struggle with is the notion of working hard versus taking time for rest. I do value my free time, my family and friend time, and my time for reflection like never before. But I also believe in the “fake it ’til you make it” axiom. After my recuperation, I probably returned to work earlier than I should have. Sometimes it’s important to get back on the horse after it throws you,

even if the bumps and bruises are still throbbing. I also think that my recuperation was helped by getting back to work and getting back into the routine that seemed so familiar and even comforting.

Lesson 5: When in Doubt, Persevere

You may not be able to defeat the bad things that happen to you, but you can probably outlast them if you just keep plugging along. I realize that this may not be the most glamorous bit of advice you will ever be given, but I have come to believe that the best thing one can often do in the worst of times is to simply keep on going. If it is a particularly bad day, just do whatever you have to do to get to the end of it. Tomorrow will be a new day, a clean slate.

My recovery was long and painful, and at times I never thought I would overcome the fatigue and the weakness that I felt. But eventually I did, and I owe it all to simply persevering and keeping the outlook that tomorrow would be better.

Lesson 6: Know That What Seems to Be a Setback Is Really an Opportunity

People are sometimes surprised when I talk about my illness in positive, almost glowing terms. But the truth is that I now look back on that experience as the single best thing that ever happened to me. I have come to believe that bad things usually end up as good things in disguise, even though that may not be easy to see at the time. That kidney stone and the resulting near-death experience had great value, and that is what I always talk about when I speak about my experience. I describe it as a great gift; audiences seem to be moved by that, and I cannot tell you how happy that makes me.

Another thing that causes great happiness in me is something that I used to turn my nose up at—platitudes, feel-good posters, and upbeat messages of all kinds. I used to feel pretty smug about such things and thought they were sappy and hollow. Since 2007, I have felt very differently about the feel-good messages that you might see on a greeting card or posted on Facebook. I now find them inspiring because I know that the messages, although often a

bit simplistic, contain powerful truths. Instead of ignoring those little messages, or turning my nose up at them, I now try to weave them into my life; I consider them little reminders from a higher power. I try to use them to make me a better lawyer, a better parent, and a better friend. Sappy? Well, maybe they are, but I try to allow myself to accept the message, and I find that it helps me.

Sometimes I struggle with patience and acceptance. To deal with those defects of character, I try to be aware of the opportunities that I know life will send my way for dealing with those things. We all experience heartache and disappointment, but these things are simply part of living life and are an opportunity to grow. In my post-2007 life, I embrace that and try to remain positive.

Lesson 7: Take Time to Reflect

I find great comfort in reflection, and I try to make lots of time for it in my post-2007 life. Call it deep thought, call it looking inward, call it meditation, call it journaling, or call it prayer, it is a way to plug into my unconscious to find peace. I find this time has great healing power. I used to think that such things were a waste of valuable time; not anymore.

Life has a way of sending us the experiences that we need. If your life is populated with little pockets of intolerance or misunderstanding, you are probably going to find a time when you will bump up against circumstances that will challenge those beliefs. Do not ignore them; this is life's way of sending you opportunities to better yourself.

Caring for the Sick: Brain Tumors, Billable Hours, and Balance



Her Story

Dina R. Richman

Career

Member at Cozen O'Connor, where I practice insurance coverage and litigation.

Education

Pomona College, BA, *magna cum laude*; UCLA School of Law, JD.

Best Advice

Find people you like working with and stick with them.

Personal

World traveler and proud aunt.

For more information about Dina

www.cozen.com

It is often said that if you don't have your health, you have nothing at all. I learned that the hard way. In April 2009, I was a second-year associate at a large litigation firm. Like most new associates, my biggest concerns were doing a good job and billing enough hours. That all changed one Monday morning as I was driving to work and my cell phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and saw that it was my dad. It was not unheard of for him to call me early in the morning, but it certainly was unusual. When I picked up, he said, "Hi, Dina. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to the emergency room. I'm having some neurological symptoms and want to get them checked out." He explained that he was having weakness on the right side of his body, to the point where he was having trouble writing. Being a doctor, my father rarely sought medical treatment, so I knew that something must be seriously wrong. I offered to go with him to the hospital, but he told me to go into work and he would update me later. A few hours later, he called me with the news—he had a brain tumor. The doctors could not tell from the MRI what kind of tumor it was, but it was large and had to be removed as soon as possible. He went to see the head of neurosurgery at UCLA that same day, and he was scheduled for surgery a few days later.

The initial operation lasted eight hours. When it was over, the surgeon had good news and bad news. The good news was that the operation had gone smoothly with no complications, and they had been able to remove much of the tumor. The bad news was that the tumor was a Glioblastoma Multiforme (GBM). GBM is a malignant, aggressive, and nearly always fatal type of brain cancer. With treatments available at that time, the five-year survival rate for GBM was five percent, and the median survival was only one year. I was not so naïve to believe that he would miraculously be cured.

Over the next few months, my father underwent several rounds of chemotherapy and radiation. Like most patients undergoing such treatment, he was nauseated, weak, lost his hair, and lost weight. Even more concerning, his neurological symptoms continued to get worse. Shortly after his surgery, he was no longer able to drive, and he was soon unable to walk without assistance. My sister and I rotated "dad duty" and picked him up from work (incredibly, he still insisted on working), brought him home,

prepared dinner, ran other errands, and spent time with him. Some of my best memories are of watching the NBA finals on TV that year with my dad (the Lakers won). It was a blessedly normal moment in an otherwise tumultuous time.

Yet my job did not just disappear. As soon as my dad was diagnosed, I talked to the partner with whom I was primarily working. He was more than understanding. He told me family should be my number one priority, and I should not worry too much about work. Thankfully, that was not just lip service. The firm allowed me unfettered flexibility with my schedule, never questioning when I had to leave early or work from home. My coworkers regularly asked how my dad was doing and were always willing to lend a sympathetic ear.

But I could not just ignore my work—my type-A personality would not let me slack off. There was only one thing I could let slide—myself. I told myself that I was young, healthy, and there would be plenty of time “later” to relax or have fun. For the time being, I would keep calm and carry on.

That attitude only worked for a little while. As winter approached, I developed a minor cold. It started to get better, but turned into a minor cough, and back to a head cold, then a slight fever, and so on. For several months, I was always slightly under the weather. Nevertheless, I told myself I had to keep soldiering on. I already felt bad about how much time I had taken off from work, and more important, my dad was getting worse. Even though it was not good for him to be around someone with a cold, he still needed help, so I wore a surgical mask around him and washed my hands constantly. Eventually my body could not handle it anymore. One day at the office, I started coughing uncontrollably. It felt like a gorilla was sitting on my chest. I was supposed to go to a meeting that night but felt so ill that I went home instead. I took my temperature: it was 104. The next day, my fever was no better, and the coughing was worse. I could barely breathe. Even walking from my bedroom to my bathroom was exhausting. I went to the doctor, who took a chest X ray and diagnosed me with pneumonia.

Even though I felt miserable, getting pneumonia had one bright side—it forced me to rest. Because my dad’s immune system was already compromised, I was forbidden from being around him

until I was completely recovered. I also could not return to work until I had the doctor's clearance. I spent about a week in a feverish daze, coughing and watching "Saved by the Bell" reruns. Even when I was well enough to go back to work, for a few weeks I could not overexert myself or I would start coughing and wheezing. Thankfully, I recovered, and for a little while things were calm.

Unfortunately, while I was getting better, my dad continued to deteriorate. In March, the doctors confirmed what we already knew—the tumor had substantially grown again. Having tried all the conventional treatments, my dad looked into various clinical trials that might be available. He was finally able to get into one at UCLA. For the trial, they would operate again and try to remove as much of the tumor as possible and then make a "vaccine" from the tumor tissue. The surgery was scheduled for June 11. It was supposed to last five to seven hours but ended up taking around twelve hours. The tumor was larger than they thought; the doctor called it a "whammy."

When I first saw Dad after the surgery, he was woozy and confused, but that was to be expected. I had high hopes that he would be noticeably better the next day as he had been after his initial surgery, but he was not. When the next day came, he did not recognize anyone. He thought it was 1999 and he was in Europe.

Two days later I walked into his hospital room and he said, "Hi, Dina!" I have never been so happy to hear such a simple phrase. Sadly, it is the last thing I remember him saying to me, because that afternoon the hospital put in a feeding tube and he could not talk. The day after that, my dad got pneumonia and the hospital put him on a ventilator.

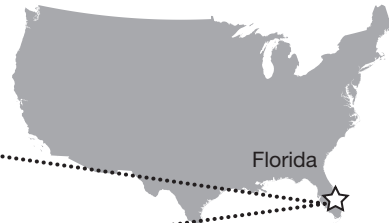
The neuro-ICU became my second home. We did not want my dad to be alone, so my sister and I, and occasionally other relatives, had shifts at the hospital. On weekdays, I would wake up, go to work until about 3:00 p.m., go to the hospital until 8:00 or 9:00 p.m., when he would fall asleep for the night, go home and sleep, then start the cycle over again. Because of the feeding tube and ventilator, my dad could not talk and could barely move. We could only ask him yes or no questions that he would answer by blinking or a hand squeeze. He had always loved to read, but now he did not have the ability to hold a book. After a few days in the ICU, I

offered to read to him, and he gladly accepted with a double eye blink. I began to read *Trojan Odyssey*, by Clive Cussler, one of his favorite authors. Every day, I would arrive at the hospital, tell him about my day, and then read a few chapters of the book. It was a welcome distraction for both of us. Not being a doctor or a nurse, there was not a lot I could do to help him from a medical perspective, but reading to him was something I could do to help him psychologically. As hard as this whole period was, I will always treasure those quiet afternoons that were just me, my dad, and *Trojan Odyssey*.

We kept hoping that my dad's pneumonia would improve and he could be weaned off the ventilator and go home, or at least leave the ICU. That never happened. Instead, the brain tumor was rapidly growing again, which made him ineligible for the clinical trial. The doctors told us he probably only had days or weeks to live. I spent most of the last two weeks of his life at the hospital. I went home only to sleep and did not go to the office at all. He died on a Friday night, and on Monday I went back to work—not because I could not take time off but because I wanted to be distracted.

Most people who become lawyers like to be in control, and I am no exception. Unfortunately, we cannot control most things in life. I could not control that my dad got brain cancer and died at the age of fifty-six. But I could control how I reacted to it and how I rebalanced my life to deal with the situation. I did not balance it perfectly, as I wore myself so thin that I contracted pneumonia. But I had to adjust my priorities and make the best of the situation. Little things like going for a walk or having a good meal (fortunately the hospital had a great cafeteria) made a huge difference in maintaining some semblance of balance. I did not make my hours that year, but I do not regret a single moment I spent with my father.

My Spiritual Journey



Her Story

Marlene Gordon

Career

Vice president, general counsel, Bacardi North America Corporation;
Global Lead Bacardi Women in Leadership Initiative.

Education

University of Chicago, BA in Economics with Honors; Northwestern
University School of Law, JD.

Best Advice

Career development and growth are important, but don't lose yourself
or your identity in the process. Don't give up on your dreams, and
always live your life on your own terms.

Personal

Married for twenty-seven years to my childhood sweetheart; college
and law school age children.

For more information about Marlene

www.sfbwmag.com/2015/12/inspirational-journey

“Because God has made us for Himself, our hearts are restless until they rest in Him.”

—Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*

Running on Empty

In December 1999, I had a rude awakening. I became sick. Not sick like I was going to die, although at the time I felt like it. I was in-house counsel at a major multinational corporation, working long hours, managing what was a crisis of massive proportion for the company, raising my two boys—then twenty-two months and seven years old, respectively. I was running on empty. I hardly had any time for my husband and zero time to take care of myself. In the midst of all this, my illness started innocuously enough. I was at work—after all, where else would I be—and I developed a major headache. I managed to make it through the day and left the office “early” around 6:00 p.m., to go home, take some aspirin, and go to bed. I forewarned my husband and my aunt, who was my live-in nanny then, “You have kiddie duty tonight because I have a major headache.”

I made it home, took a shower, turned off all the lights, and attempted to go to bed. The problem, however, was that my headache refused to go away, and it stayed with me for days. After popping aspirin with no relief, I made an appointment a week or so later to see a doctor. I didn’t even have a regular doctor—after all, who had time for such a meaningful relationship? My job, my kids, my husband, and my extended family were just about all the relationships I could handle. After searching through the providers listed in my health insurance book, I found a doctor and went to see her, telling her that I had been having a headache every day and that I needed something to make it go away immediately. “I am too busy to be sick,” I remember telling her.

Time for a Time-Out

The doctor told me that I was suffering from chronic tension headaches, and she promptly honored my request and wrote me a prescription for Fioricet, a prescription given for tension headaches.

Yes! I was eager to continue my harried life—pain-free. However, my body simply would not cooperate. Even though I took the medication as prescribed, I did not get much relief. Things got worse. As the days and weeks progressed, I started to get panic attacks and began suffering from anxiety. I worried about everything:

“What if I get on that plane to go on that business trip and it crashes, what would happen to my children?”

“What if my baby wandered out of the house and drowned in our pool?”

“What if my mother got sick and died?”

I went back to the doctor and she increased the Fioricet dosage. That was her treatment solution. Dutifully, I continued to take the medication and put all my hope in the increased dosage to cure my woes. Much to my discontent, the headaches only got worse. Now I not only had headaches but also nausea and a lot of stomach discomfort. Convinced that I had a brain tumor of some sort, I made an appointment to see a neurologist. The neurologist was like no doctor I had ever seen before. He sat me down and started to ask me a lot of questions about myself:

“Do you exercise?”

“What’s your diet like?”

“What do you do for fun?”

“What do you do for yourself?”

I looked at him like he had two heads. Seriously, I thought, “What do I do for fun?” I could not remember the last time I had *any* fun. I barely had time to brush my teeth and comb my hair, and he wanted to know “What do I do for myself?” After fumbling over my words for a few minutes, I looked at him sheepishly and said, “I don’t exercise; my diet is horrible—I barely have time to eat, and when I do, it is hardly what I would consider a nutritious meal. I do not do things for fun. I work and take care of my family, and that means I don’t have time to do anything for myself.”

He looked at me with that serious look that doctors give their patients when they think they are about to say something profound and said, “It sounds like you are under a tremendous amount of stress. Everyone deals with stress differently and has a different

tolerance threshold. Your chronic tension headaches are the result of your body asking you for a time-out. Listen to it.” In the end, he and I worked on a plan of care that included biofeedback therapy, meditation, committing to an exercise program, developing healthy eating habits, and taking time out of my hellish schedule to find some time to do something for me—and only me. My husband was very supportive, and we reached an agreement that Saturdays would be my day to do whatever I chose to do. This began my journey to physical recovery.

Finding Myself

Around this time, I also began my journey to spiritual recovery. I use the word “recovery” in this context because I grew up with a spiritual background but it took a backseat after I left home to go to college. I frequently went to church, read my Bible, and prayed during my formative years. However, beginning in college, through law school, and the early years of my marriage and motherhood, my spiritual side was placed on the backburner. I had told myself that I was a superwoman: I could do all things through me; I got all my strength from me, myself, and I. I persuaded myself that there were no mountains so high that I, in my misguided mind, could not climb them on my own. In sum, I was self-sufficient with a capital “S.” *I was in control of me.*

It took these months of headaches, nausea, and losing confidence in my body and my mind to go full throttle at all times for me to realize that *I am in control of nothing*. God placed these physical discomforts on me to “wake me up” physically, mentally, and spiritually, and looking back I am so very grateful that I suffered simply from headaches, panic attacks, and anxiety. His divine “wake-up call” could have been so much more dramatic, if not catastrophic.

Fast forward to the present day, and I listen to the hit song *Wake Me Up*, by Avicii. The lyrics totally resonate with me because of the journey I took to spiritual recovery. The verses talk about finding one’s self without realizing one was lost to begin with, and trying to carry the weight of the entire world with only my two hands. The lyrics reminded me of that time in 1999. Now that I am older and wiser, I know that I never have to go it alone again.

After agreeing on my “Get Well Plan,” or, better yet, my “Coping with Stress Plan” with the neurologist, I earnestly began to do the things I agreed to do. I religiously went to my biofeedback sessions; I became a gold card member at my local nutrition store. I started to exercise and lost some weight, and I would meditate nightly before I went to bed. By the spring of 2000, I was on my way back to physical recovery, and my chronic tension headaches, panic attacks, and anxiety slowly subsided.

Yet I still did not feel right. I felt like my wings had been clipped. Something was missing. My belief that I was superwoman had proved to be false. I no longer trusted that I could do all things on my own strength. And if this wasn’t true, then what was true? I still had this feeling that I was missing something in my life, and I had a deep longing in my heart. In a nutshell, I was *restless* in my spirit. I remember driving to work and thinking, “what is this life we are living all about?”

Finding Peace and Learning to Value Relationships

In March 2000, I embarked on a new journey to develop a personal relationship with God. In other words, I started my spiritual recovery. The catalyst, of course, was rooted in the physical debility I was recovering from and my now clear understanding that I was not, and never would be, wholly self-sufficient. My need for God to play a prominent role in my life—if not the most prominent role—became crystal clear to me when my pastor quoted Saint Augustine who said, “Man is restless until he rests in God!” It was like BINGO! Fireworks went off, and I had the answer to the restlessness I was feeling in my spirit. I had clear evidence that I could not go it alone, that I needed help, and now I knew exactly where to go to get that help. God, my Father and the Creator of the universe, was the source of my help.

I began to think long and hard about my life, and I became very honest with myself. I admitted to myself that I spent all my time honoring my obligations and did not spend a lot of time truly enjoying myself. I realized then that I had been trying to find pleasure, and even comfort, in worldly things—my job, the car I drove, the home I lived in, the vacations I took—in other words, all the

physical things money could buy me. The reality was that I was genuinely disappointed that I was not *totally and completely* happy, at peace, or comforted by all these things. I had never before acknowledged or understood that these worldly things *alone* could not give me the total contentment and sense of spiritual peace that I was yearning. I began to pray and earnestly ask God to give me a sense of peace, a peace that surpassed all understanding. The answer to that prayer came with the realization that I could only get that sense of spiritual peace if I developed a personal relationship with God. God gave me the wisdom to understand that I had been totally consumed with the notion of honoring my obligations. All I had time for was to go to work and give fifty percent of who I was to my employer, and then go home and give the other fifty percent to my children, my husband, and the rest of my family. I simply had *no time* for anything else. I was living life in “over-drive” without any spiritual nurturing and development, and that led to my restlessness.

My spiritual journey began with the development of an understanding of the following three things: (1) that I needed to have *faith* in God; (2) that I needed to live my life with *hope* (that blessed hope that we are assured of); and (3) that life is meaningless without *love*. I came to understand that I could not achieve *spirituality* on my own, and to achieve peace I needed to “rest in God.” The question then became, “How do I rest in God?” I began to read the book *Experiencing God*, by Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, and from that book I developed the understanding that to rest in God I needed to experience Him in and around my life. The authors helped me to understand that it was not enough to know “about” God, but that I needed to know Him by developing a personal relationship with Him where God revealed Himself, His purposes, and His Ways to me, so that I could then experience God working through me. Prior to reading this book, I had always believed I had a relationship with God, but in truth and in fact, I did not. I did certain acts that intimated that I had a relationship with Him. For example, I had accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior at age thirteen; I was baptized during my pregnancy with my second son back in 1998; I read my Bible occasionally; I went to church occasionally; I said prayers; and I did good things for others. Despite

all of these things, there was no personal relationship between God and me.

I started to really ponder the nature of my relationships, those that were good and those that were not so good and needed improvement. I reflected on when I first started seriously dating my husband. I remembered how much time I spent getting to know him better. I remembered how I wanted to know his likes, dislikes, and what made him tick. I remembered how I spent every effort trying to do things to make him happy. I remembered how much time and effort I put into nurturing that relationship with him. After expending all that time and effort, the end result was that I came to rely on him and he came to rely on me. We shaped each other's lives, affected each other's moods, and influenced each other's outlook on life. We began to plan our lives together and dream of the things we wanted to accomplish together. We wanted to be a part of each other's future.

I also considered all the other personal relationships in my life, for example, my relationship with my parents, my brother, my children, extended family members, and close friends. I thought about how each relationship influenced my life. I thought about the time and effort (or lack thereof) that I put into each relationship. I realized that I had devoted the time to nurture and maintain all of the important relationships in my life, and I saw the benefits.

With that backdrop, I began to think about the time and effort I had put into my personal relationship with God. It was utterly and completely disappointing. I realized that I had failed to take the time to truly know God. I could not hear when God spoke to me. I could not identify God's activity in my life. I was not willing to let God completely influence my beliefs, character, and behavior. I did not always want to respond the way God wanted me to respond. I was clueless as to what God wanted to do through my life; and very rarely had I asked Him to speak to me and guide me. Remember, I believed I was superwoman. As they say, I was large and in charge. I needed no one's guidance until I fell flat on my face.

I began to pray and ask God to interact with me in my life. I told Him I wanted to hear Him speak to me; I wanted to see, welcome, appreciate, and celebrate His activity in my life. I wanted

Him to completely influence my beliefs, character, and behavior. I wanted to respond to His activity in my life the way He wanted me to respond. I wanted to know and understand what He wanted to do through my life. I asked, no begged, Him to use me for His purposes. I wanted His guidance and direction. I completely surrendered to His will. I humbled myself before my Creator. I devoured His Word. I began attending church and Bible study classes, and I even took a college level theology course. I learned. I prayed. I lived out what I learned. I shared what I learned. I became a teacher to others. I developed a personal love relationship with God.

In May 2000, a coworker gave me a pamphlet simply titled *A One Hour Retreat*. The retreat required that I take one hour, go to a quiet place, and meditate on God. The premise was Jesus and his example of prayer. Jesus prayed all the time, and he always took the time, no matter how busy he was, to go off quietly and talk to his Father. It outlined the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, right before he was betrayed and ultimately turned over to his enemies to be crucified. Jesus was overcome with grief because he knew his fate. He told his disciples, Peter, James, and John, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me.” Jesus then went off to pray, and when he returned he found his disciples asleep. Jesus said to them, “Couldn’t you stay awake and watch with me for even one hour?”

So *A One Hour Retreat* required me to spend one hour alone with God. It was broken up into different sections. I do not remember each section specifically, but I remember the first ten minutes required me to thank God for any and every thing I could think of. I distinctly remember the last section. It was ten minutes of silence during which I was supposed to clear my mind and listen to what God was saying to me. After the first fifty minutes, clearing my mind and being completely still was relatively easy to do.

I know many people believe that God does not talk to His people anymore. That somehow that was something that He did in biblical times but does not do today. This is so far from the truth. What I have learned and what I learned on that evening when I did the one-hour retreat is that God speaks to us all the time. Most of the time, we are simply not listening. Other times, we are so out of

touch, so out of tune with who God is, that even if we are trying to listen, we are not capable of hearing. Well, on that evening, I was listening, and I heard every word He said. And what He said to me are three things that I will never forget as long as I live:

1. “Show Your Love to Others.”
2. “Love Me.”
3. “Do Not Forget Me.”

Now some may read this and think, “Why does she claim God said these things?” I make the claim because I had spent the prior fifty minutes meditating on God and His Word. I was calm, quiet, and at peace within myself and with my environment. My mind was completely clear. For those of you who have meditated before, you understand, I am sure, the complete feeling of serenity that comes as a result. So it was within this setting that those three thoughts came to my mind, one right after the other. I woke up (I do not mean literally because I was not actually asleep, but I felt so rested and renewed, it is as if I had just woken up) and immediately grabbed pen and paper and wrote the three thoughts down.

I am now convinced that those three thoughts were messages from God because they make no sense for me to think or say to myself. Although I might tell myself to show love to others, it does not make sense for me to tell myself to love me and do not forget me.

Ever since that evening, I have had a strong conviction to try to do those three things. I cannot say that I fulfill all three directives all the time. I, like everyone else, get caught up in the world around me, and I react to or internalize events that happen around me or to me not always in the way God wants me to do. Nonetheless, I have never forgotten the messages, and I always come back to them. And each time I fall off the horse, I get back on and keep trying.

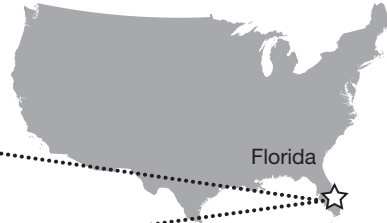
Today I thank God for His intervention. I thank Him for loving me and for intervening in my life rather than leaving me to my own peril. Today, I am strong in my faith, and I am at peace with myself. I know who I am, and I know what I am not. I have been through many crises since the spring of 2000 when I embarked on my journey of spiritual growth. Each trial has only served to strengthen my personal relationship with God. I have lost my two

best friends, one in November 2001 shortly after she delivered her first child, and the other in April 2009. My faith got me through those losses and then carried me through the prolonged illness and death of my mother, who was my biggest role model, my greatest supporter, and my truest friend, in September 2012.

I trusted God when my mother, then age sixty-two, suffered a couple of years of deteriorating health, false diagnoses, and then was ultimately diagnosed with the rare and genetic condition called Familial Amyloidosis. I continued to trust Him when my mother was told she needed a heart and a liver transplant and would relocate to Rochester, Minnesota, to be treated at the Mayo Clinic. My faith did not waiver for the months of waiting while my mom was on the transplant list and then received the transplants in October 2011, which led to nine months of hospitalization, kidney failure, dialysis, multiple life-threatening infections, and numerous times on life support. She was released from the Mayo Clinic and returned home to South Florida on her sixty-fifth birthday in June of 2012, and the last ninety days she spent at home. I trusted God through it all.

In closing, my personal relationship with God—my faith; living my life with the *hope* that only God provides; and my deeply rooted belief that life is meaningless without *love*—has brought me through some very dark days. My personal relationship with God has allowed me to be strong, resilient, and count this adventure called life as all joy, no matter the circumstances. I completely understand that without this relationship I do not have the strength to face and conquer life's challenges or to fully take advantage of all its opportunities. My personal relationship with God gives me the courage to live, the confidence to die, and the strength to face all that comes in between. My personal relationship with God has taught me humility and has stilled my restless heart.

The Unexpected Path



Her Story

Jennifer A. Lizotte

Career

Counsel, operations for Vistana Signature Experiences, Inc.

Education

University of Central Florida, BA in Legal Studies; Dwayne O. Andreas School of Law, JD.

Best Advice

Put into motion today the goals you have for tomorrow. You are today what you set forth to be years ago.

Personal

Mother of two adult children, one on the autistic spectrum, and proud grandmother of one.

For more information about Jennifer

www.linkedin.com/in/jenniferlizotte

My Story Begins

Sometimes I am most thankful for unexpected detours. Those detours molded me into the person I am and gave me my life's greatest gifts. My story starts in the family doctor's office with my mother. The doctor was telling my mother, not me, that I was pregnant. This should have been a joyous occasion, but when you are fifteen years old and the third of five children of ex-military, deeply Catholic, and hard-working parents, the scene is less than ideal. Although a hellion of a child (my mother's words), I was academically gifted and a great athlete. For as far back as I could remember, I wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up. Part of my childhood was spent in a small town just outside of Washington, D.C. My fondest memories of living near D.C. were visiting the Lincoln Memorial and field trips to Congress. Strange for a first grader, I know.

By the time I was fifteen, my father had retired from the Navy, and we were living in civilian housing in Florida. I started hanging out with the wrong crowd. I got involved with drugs, alcohol, and, of course, unprotected sex. I still remember that day at the doctor's office in detail, and later at home when telling my father my horrible secret. After coming home from the doctor's office, my mother told me to go tell my father the news. Both my parents worked full-time jobs, and my father worked long nights to support his five children. He was napping before heading to work that evening. I told my dad through the door of his bedroom that I had a problem and needed to talk to him about it. He motioned for me to come in and said, "Sit down honey, I am here for you." I told him I was pregnant. He was blindsided. I was Daddy's Little Girl. I was special in my father's eyes . . . until that day. The words he next spoke still haunt me to this day: "Get out. Get out of my room. I don't want to see your face." I was hurt, not from his words, but from the fact that I had failed him and my mother. I ran to my room and slammed the door . . . and then cried until my whole body ached. A few hours later my father came into my room and told me I was giving the baby up for adoption. It was not until I wrote my story on this very day that I realize my father did not go to work that night.

My Teenage Pregnancy

My future was set for me: my parents had unilaterally decided that I would give my baby up for adoption. The only other choice, of course, was to keep the baby, as abortion was not and is still not an option for me. My parents researched where to get assistance, and we ended up at Catholic Social Services. It was this nonprofit agency that told my parents about a local alternative school, and I soon enrolled and began taking high school classes at the BETA Center. My self-esteem was at an all-time low. I was disappointed in myself and disappointed I had let my parents down, but I trudged along in my mother's old clothing, trying to hide my pregnancy from everyone on the street.

I gave birth in March of my tenth year of school, two months shy of my sixteenth birthday. My mother held my hand the entire twenty-four hours of my labor, never leaving my side. I was surprised by the absolutely stunning baby girl that came from me. The entire birth experience and the miracle of life were much more emotional than I had anticipated, and it gave me strength. It brought back the drive and determination for which I was infamous as a child: a characteristic I thought I had lost through this experience. My parents called it "stubbornness," but that "stubbornness" pushed me to my next step. Despite my parent's belief that adoption was the right choice for me, I could not do it after looking into the innocent face of my daughter. I knew I had to concoct another plan.

Forging My Own Path

When my daughter was four days old, I was discharged from the hospital and made plans with Catholic Social Services to place my daughter in temporary foster care. I went home to my parents, solemn, but determined. As soon as I got home, I called a few friends and set my plan in motion. When my daughter was seven days old, I picked her up from foster care, packed my few belongings, and left my parent's home. I am forever grateful to my dear friend Donna and her husband for taking my daughter and me into their home.

I remained determined to finish high school. I missed so much school during the 1983–1984 school year that I had to attend summer school to complete the tenth grade. It was at the BETA Center

while attending summer school (with my newborn daughter, Britany, in tow) that I met a young recent graduate of Harvard University, David. He was my guidance counselor and administered the SAT that summer. There was no prep course, no planning or studying. I did not put much effort into the SATs. My dreams of becoming an attorney had vanished upon learning I was pregnant and then deciding to keep my baby. But when David sat me down to review my SAT scores, what he had to say was not what I expected: “Jennifer, if you are thinking of quitting school, I am begging you not to. With these SAT scores, Harvard and Princeton will be knocking down your door.” I was shocked; what was I supposed to do? His words gave me my second boost of strength and ignited my stubbornness. I gave summer school my all and finished my tenth year of high school with straight A’s. I found a job in the fast-food industry working thirty-five to forty hours a week, doing what I needed to do to support my small family. Then reality hit me: how could a single, teen mother attend high school and work at the same time? It was impossible. My responsibilities to my daughter were much more important than my dream of becoming an attorney. So I quit school right before eleventh grade.

Building My Family

Of course, my story does not end there, or you would not be reading this. Moving forward a couple of years, I met a wonderful man, and we married when my daughter was three years old. We moved to Fort Lauderdale, and I landed a job as an administrative assistant. Here I met another person from an Ivy League school who believed in me. Steve Weiss was my boss and had a doctorate degree in computer science. He gave me a gift one year for my birthday: a *Black’s Law Dictionary*. On the inside of the front cover, he wrote: “If there was any one in this world who could learn every word in this book and understand it and in what context each should be used, it is you.” At that time, I had no idea what a *Black’s Law Dictionary* was or in what “context” it should be used! But there it was, my third boost of strength. I signed up to take the GED in 1988, two years after I was supposed to graduate from high school. A few months later, I registered for one class at the local community college: English Composition 101. I had no idea what to expect!

Starting College

I was scared. Scared of not being smart enough to be there, scared of the other students learning I was a high school dropout and a teen mom. But there I was, sitting in a classroom on my very first day of college. I remember actually trembling. My goodness, I did not even know how to take notes! As soon as the professor started speaking and I glanced at our syllabus (I did not even know what a syllabus was), I knew I was going to excel! This class was about creative writing! That I could do, and I completed my very first college class with an A.

Detours

But what I could not do was juggle *two* children and attend college—yes, two children. I was pregnant again (it was planned this time, just not expected so soon). I would once again forgo school for the sake of my family, but the one college class I had taken had lit the pilot light deep inside me and kept me fueled for the next chapter in my life. In February 1990, I gave birth to a beautiful blonde-haired, green-eyed boy: my Matthew. Matthew means “Gift from God,” and my Matthew was definitely a gift from God. I knew Matthew was not going to be a typical child from the day he was born. At eighteen months old, my pediatrician told me Matthew was “mentally retarded.” I did not believe her and promptly changed doctors. By the time Matthew was two years old, he had odd ritualistic behaviors such as obsessive cleaning. The teachers in his day care used to sing “Mr. Clean, Mr. Clean” when I dropped him off. He did not speak until he was almost five years old. I made appointments with every specialist in town to find out what was wrong. No one had an answer. The effects of my yearning to know took a toll on my marriage, and my marriage ended when Matthew was six years old and Brittany was twelve.

Back on the College Track

There is a silver lining to the end of my marriage: the Pell Grant! So there I was in 1995, a single mother of two, working full time during the day, and attending college at night. In the

meantime, Matthew started kindergarten, and the school psychologist suggested Matthew may be autistic. Armed with this suggestion, it was the behavioral studies clinic in the local children's hospital that diagnosed Matthew as profoundly autistic. This time, however, life's punch was not going to stop me from continuing college.

I finished my associates degree in 1998 and immediately transferred to Rollins College. But don't let these black letters written on white paper fool you into believing this was not a struggle: the choice to attend college at night and work during the day was not an easy one. I wanted to quit many, many times. There were days when I just wanted to go home and sleep. But every time I felt this way, I just had to look at my children. I was doing this for them—they would see the benefits of hard work and determination. Plus, the increased earnings with a bachelor's degree would help care for Matthew in the coming years. Although Matthew progressed from moderate to high functioning on the autistic spectrum with Asperger's syndrome, it was believed he would never be able to live independently.

By the year 2000, I was also working in the corporate legal department for a large hotel company. The dream of becoming an attorney again grew inside me as I worked side by side with some of the most intelligent people I have ever met and on projects that tested the limits of my intellect. After some convincing from my supervisor, I completed the course work for a BS in Growth Management and Environmental Studies at Rollins and then transferred to the University of Central Florida in their legal studies program. I was told my potential growth as a non-attorney in the legal department would increase with a degree in legal studies. In one of my conversations with a favorite professor, Dr. Randford Pyle, I told him that I secretly still had some of my childhood dream to go to law school, but I had grave doubts, one being that "I was too old." As a response, he asked me, "How old would you be when you graduate law school, if you go?" I responded, "I will be almost forty years old; yes, I would actually graduate the year I turn forty." He then said, "Do you want to be forty years old and a paralegal or forty years old and an attorney?" Long, pregnant pause (no, I was not pregnant again).

Milestones

I graduated from the University of Central Florida in May 2002 (the same year Brittany graduated from high school) with my BA in Legal Studies and a minor in Business. I took the LSAT in August of that same year. I took a year off and enjoyed spending time with my son. But I was finally ready to pursue law school.

Meeting the Challenge of Law School

Out of the three local law schools to which I submitted an application, I was accepted to all three—with partial scholarships! I could not believe it. I am still in shock today. I was accepted. I WAS ACCEPTED!!! I could not wait to tell my parents. Twenty-one years after feeling like such a huge disappointment to my parents, twenty years after dropping out of high school, and sixteen years after my first college course, I was accepted to three law schools. This time, my family celebrated with absolute gusto.

I chose the school closest to my home that offered a part-time evening program geared for working adults. The next three and one-half years proved to be the most difficult I have ever endured. My sleep deprivation got worse, my stress levels increased exponentially, and so did my weight. Well, I think any 1L (or other freshman) can relate. But despite it all, in May 2008, the same year my son graduated from high school with his special education diploma, I proudly received my Juris Doctor degree.

Looking Back

I have learned that it is not the mistakes we make in our lives or the circumstances in which we often find ourselves that define who we are: it is our character, our attitude, and our determination in how we respond to those circumstances that mold us into who we become. Every action we take is a choice, and often a gamble. I had my doubts, but almost thirty-two years after hearing those words from my father in his bedroom, I know now that I chose wisely. My gambles paid off. Those gambles—and the gifts they brought to my life—meant everything.

Chapter 7: Getting Back Up

Today I am a licensed, practicing attorney in the state of Florida. I have been with that large hotel company for more than fifteen years and have held the position of in-house counsel for the past six years. I have worked for and with attorneys who have embraced my life history and less-than-perfect past. My daughter, Brittany, is a single mother of the most gorgeous, intelligent, little boy in the world (yes, I am a proud grandma). Matthew still lives with me and has grown into a very respectable, caring, and intelligent young man. He has dreams of also attending college. I am in a committed relationship with a man who has endless patience for my ambition and determination. We even own a successful small business together. Needless to say, I still do not get enough sleep, but I could not be happier. And most of all, my family is proud of me. I have my self-esteem back, and I am, once again, the apple of my daddy's eyes (and my mom's too).

REFLECTIONS

1. What tools and techniques have you used to address stress and crisis as they arise in your life?
2. Do you have trouble with drugs and/or alcohol? Do you have loved ones with drug or alcohol problems? Consider seeking help from Alcoholics Anonymous Narcotics Anonymous, or Alanon.
3. How do you recognize that you're reaching a critical point and need to do something about what is happening in your life? For example, do you recognize signs that you are sick? Overstressed? Need a vacation?
4. What do you do for yourself? Do you meditate? Exercise? Journal? Scrapbook? Golf? Yoga? Do other fun activities?
5. What do you do for your significant other?
6. How do you care for yourself physically?
7. How do you care for yourself emotionally?
8. How do you care for yourself spiritually?
9. Is it the appropriate role of the workplace to address these non-work, life-style/health issues?
10. How do you handle eating properly? What can be done to make this easier, healthier, better?
11. How can you do better?
12. What was your last vacation? Was it fun? Relaxing?
13. How do you relax?