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RESILIENCE

Tales of Triumph
over Adversity



Resilience

What does it
take to triumph
over adversity?
Five Weinberg
College alumni
share their
hard-won
wisdom.

INTERVIEWS BY ANNE STEIN

The loss of a job or a spouse. A devastating diagnosis. Relationship problems. A failure to reach career goals. Few lives are immune to such setbacks, which can feel humbling, if not overwhelming.

Some people crumble in the face of these challenges, while others adapt under adversity and emerge stronger and more focused than they were before. What makes the difference?

Often, an ability to find meaning in the midst of hardship can help individuals hurdle misfortunes that might hobble others.

"People can find surprising ways to develop new sources of purpose and meaning in life," psychology professor Greg Miller says. "In some cases, their levels of psychological well-being exceed what they were before the adverse event."

Some things are easier to make sense of than others, of course, and some people have resources in their lives—supportive family members, mentors and friends—that make it easier to bounce back. For others, the task is harder. "But people are not anywhere near as fragile as psychologists or the cultural narrative assumes they are," Miller says. "People find ways."

An alumni magazine is often a place for graduates to tout promotions, entrepreneurial successes and best-selling books. But the profiles that follow celebrate achievements borne of challenge or tragedy, transformed through perseverance and self-reflection. Whatever the circumstances, these alumni embody resilience and the ability to create new meaning and purpose out of crisis.

I wrestled for several years at Northwestern, and throughout my life I've always kept in pretty good shape—weights, running, going to the gym, hiking.

During my senior year, I earned my pilot license with several of my Sigma Chi fraternity brothers. After graduating, I became an orthodontist, and had one practice in Chicago and another in Dixon/Sterling, Ill. I flew my two-engine Beech airplane between the offices hundreds of times over the years.

In July 2006, I was flying to the Dixon airport when I hit a patch of dense fog that hadn't been predicted. First my right engine failed, then my left, and I had to glide in. At that point, I realized I had lost power, and my training took over. I just concentrated on flying. I passed through the fog and saw the ground approaching. The last thing I remember seeing was the green of the cornfields before I crashed.

I was in the cornfield for three hours before I was rescued. At first I was dazed, and then I became very aware. I saw I had a few minor cuts and knew that I had a spinal cord injury. My cell phone kept ringing with calls from friends and my wife. But I couldn't reach it.

In the hospital in Rockford, Ill., I found out that my spine had broken near the T12 vertebra and I was a paraplegic. But it could have been so much worse. I was lucky—I have full upper body [mobility] and no traumatic brain injury.

I was at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago for the month of August. One doctor asked, "What are your goals?" I remember saying, "I want to be as independent as I can possibly be." I'm a calm, logical person. I look ahead, I don't think "poor me." By October I could drive, and by December I started seeing patients again.

My wife, my kids and my friends all helped me get through this. We have a Northwestern tailgaters group, and the autumn after the crash I was at almost every home game. Someone at RIC introduced me to hand-cycling as a way to get back into shape. And now I have a new group of friends—the hand-cyclists I train and race with. I'm hooked. In so many ways, exercise has been a lifesaver.

Ted Moss '71

on where to begin:

The first thing is to accept your situation. It's not good to look back continually at where you were. You need to go forward and focus on whatever is possible for you.



PHOTO: ANDY HAGEDON

I went to St. Ignatius College Prep in Chicago and always got good grades, so when I first came to Northwestern, I felt confident. But college is different. I started as a pre-med and really overloaded myself with classes: AP bio, physics, calculus, French. I didn't do well. I got Ds and Cs and maybe one B.

I was devastated. I went to see the dean to find out what I could do, and he encouraged me to drop my major. But once I told him I wanted to stay pre-med, we made a plan. I dropped physics and started meeting with my biology professor on weekends.

What really helped me was taking a summer enrichment course that prepared students to be successful in medical school. It was geared particularly toward African American, Hispanic and Asian students. The course was a combination of mentoring, MCAT prep and shadowing doctors. Our counselors were medical students, so we could talk to them about what it was like to be in medical school. We were all students of color and we weren't embarrassed to ask questions. We had people telling us, "You can do it. This is how we did it and we're going to help you get those tools."

I and other African-American pre-meds at Northwestern were trying to feel comfortable in an environment that was very different than what we were used to. There were definitely opportunities to get help, but at that time you had to know where to go to seek them out. It took me getting Ds to get some help. I was wondering, "Am I as smart as my counterparts?"

The next year was like night and day: I was so focused and studied so hard. I got tutoring when I needed it, took summer courses and made sure I did well on the MCATs. It was a mindset change. I became a lot more confident and I knew I could achieve it. I discovered that having a temporary failure or setback was not who I was.

I learned that I had to persevere. And I did: I went to medical school and I am now a hospitalist in obstetrics and gynecology at Carle Foundation Hospital in Urbana, Ill.

Dawne Collier '93

on regrouping:

Everyone who has been successful has failed a few times before. Don't let that be the final chapter. Give yourself time to be upset or sad, then figure out a plan to approach your goal again if it's something you really want.



John Trautwein '84

on facing challenges:

Stop. Breathe. Take your time. Secondly: surround yourself with people you love. Share with them, and they will help you see the good and the hope that is indeed there!

My wife Susie and I suffered the worst tragedy in 2010 that a family can experience: the suicide of our 15-year-old son Will.

Will, the oldest of our four children, was a freshman in high school when he lost the will to live. He was big and strong and healthy. He was very popular. He was a good student. He was in a band and wrote music. He played lacrosse. He was a leader.

And we lost him.

Five days before he died, I looked at him and said, "Do you want to trade places? Look at how much fun it is to be you—you're just starting high school, you have all these cool friends and wonderful opportunities!" I was so excited for him. That's how clueless I was. I never once in a million years saw that Will was hurting or suffering.

Within hours after Will's death, I was contacted by suicide prevention and mental health groups that I didn't even know existed because nobody talks about it. We learned that one in six of our kids is suffering from depression. Teenagers today live in a 24-hour cycle of negative news and are under constant, extreme academic pressure. With the Internet and cell phones dominating their lives, everything they do is recorded and available for anyone to see. As adults, we don't know what it is like to have that type of exposure and pressure as a teenager—it simply did not exist in our day!

My wife and I decided we were going to talk about these issues to spread awareness that our kids are struggling. We started the Will to Live Foundation, a nonprofit that focuses on teen mental health and suicide prevention. The message is for kids to reach out and love each other. We sponsor sports teams and events, a music festival and an annual 5K run, have a "Club Will to Live" in 15 high schools and give scholarships. I give about 200 talks a year around the country.

I don't know how I would have gotten through it had my kids, my friends and their friends not put together this extremely positive foundation. My friends and teammates from Northwestern were instrumental in my healing when we lost Will. They were the example of the "life teammates" concept we give to kids now: reach out and love each other, and you will deliver hope to each other as well. Life's hard, but if you can be there for one another, it can be great.

As a result of losing Will, but keeping him alive through the foundation, my focus has changed. I used to spend 80 percent of my time thinking about and planning for tomorrow. Now I spend 90 percent of my time on today. I take it a day at a time. Carrying Will's light enables me to do just that. It motivates me every day.

I came to South Africa in 1993 because I wanted to be part of the first elections there, and then I stayed. In 1998, I went to Zimbabwe to start an HIV/AIDS program for a U.S.-based non-governmental organization. I was 27, and it was a well-funded project; Zimbabwe had the world's highest HIV infection rate.

The experience opened my eyes to the limitations that aid organizations face in bringing about change. It was a real period of disillusionment for me. There I was, a young female outsider in charge of a lot of money to reduce the HIV infection rate, and what we were doing wasn't working. HIV had a huge stigma. People regarded me simply as access to money and funds. They'd tell me whatever they thought I wanted to hear, rather than speak honestly about what was going on.

I realized that if change was going to come, it wasn't going to happen because of people like me—it would be through Zimbabweans themselves. It was humbling and eye-opening for someone who had spent the previous 10 years thinking I'd go out and change the world.

I left my dream job and went back to the United States. At home, people thought I was an amazing Mother Theresa type. But that wasn't true. I had a 401(k) and had made a hefty salary. I felt incredibly alone and isolated.

So I started writing about the experience and working as a consultant to NGOs to challenge them to address what's going on more strategically. The whole process forced me to ask, "What can I uniquely offer to promote and support social change?" The answer was to use my writing and communication skills. I wrote a book, which helped me make sense of what happened.

I also established my own consultant organization, Troublemakers. I created it because I wish I had been one. Too often I signed off on projects I knew were wrong. Now I talk about courageous leadership in organizations and society and the willingness to speak your own truth, as uncomfortable as that might be. I credit the College with helping me to discover my calling. Knowing what you want to do and why you want to do it makes it easier to navigate all that comes your way.

Jillian Reilly '92

on trusting yourself:

Let your instincts and intuition guide you. They will help you stay the course whatever challenges come your way. If your internal compass is properly set, then you can better bounce back from temporary challenges.

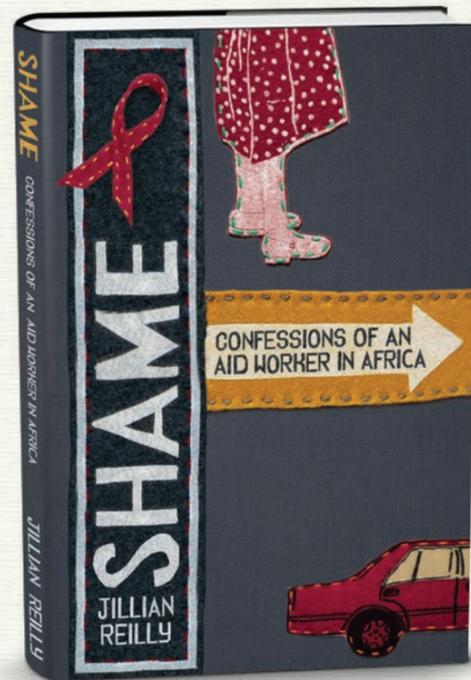


PHOTO: JARED SOARES

Larry Irving '76

on finding support:

It's the three Fs: faith, family, and foundation. My faith is a comfort and helps me in times of stress. Family will give you moral support and encouragement. And my foundation is my friends, the people I work with, and my clients. If I have any doubts, I think about these people and realize they will sustain me. Hopefully no one goes through this journey alone.

When I was diagnosed with cancer in late 2007, I found out that there's an endpoint to this great journey. There's actually a date on my personal milk carton. My wife had cancer when she was 21, so I knew it was survivable. But cancer does make you focus. It also helped me re-think some of my career goals. Over the years, I have consulted and worked for various huge companies, such as Hewlett Packard. But now I've decided I want to use technology to assist people, rather than just comfort the comfortable and enrich the affluent.

Fortunately, I've had a lot to draw on professionally to pursue this. After Northwestern, I went to law school, and then I went to work at a large law firm and later on Capitol Hill. Eventually I worked for the Clinton administration as an assistant secretary of commerce and helped develop our nation's first Internet policies. In 2008, six months after I had surgery, I was asked to serve on President Obama's transition team. I served from November to February, and then I started radiation in 2009. Subsequently, I had some great job offers, but they weren't satisfying. Ultimately, I wanted to do more for nonprofits and startups.

To cope with my diagnosis and treatment, I relied on my faith, my wife's experiences and her faith, my family, great clients and good work to do. I just kept pushing through it. Most people who knew me didn't know I was sick until I took time off. I didn't feel sorry for myself, but it did make me take stock.

Today, I use the skills I've learned and the people I know to continue beating the drum about using technology in a positive fashion. I'm working on a book about the disruptive power of technology and what we can do with it to improve life. How do we put the citizen back into the process?

Sometimes when unexpected things happen, they give you a reason to pause and ask, "Am I optimizing my time here?" I hope I am a better steward of my talents and gifts as a result of that diagnosis of cancer, knowing that tomorrow's not promised. ■