

Elevé

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OCTOBER 2025



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ABOUT THE EXPERIENCES THAT RESHAPED THEIR WORLDS.**



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October 2025

contents

LIFESTYLE

07

Editor's letter

By Haley Kershner

33

**Fall cocktails
to savor**

37

**Fall mocktails
to sip**

47

**Editor's
shelf**

67

**Reset
rituals**

71

**Fall recipes
to gather around**

PERSPECTIVE

34

**The freedom
of far away**

Ashley Rhoden

92

Learning grace

Monique Swansen

96

**The slow evolution of
Julie DeLong**

Julie DeLong

100

**How travel taught
Shea to slow down
and savor life**

Shea Keats



SPOTLIGHT

24

**The decade
she stayed silent**

Michelle Mitchell

30

**In the company
of horses**

Heather Satterley

40

Joy rises to the top

Michelle Röse

68

Breaking the silence

Aitza Negron

72

Unseen battles

Nicole Davis

80

**Growing up under
communism, leaving
everything behind,
and finding the
American dream**

Alex Mic-Podar

88

**The courage
to rebuild**

Brittany Brown

FEATURES

08

Unfollow the Rules
Sharrin Fuller

12

**The women rewriting
the rules of work**
Michelle Röse & Shea Keats

16

**From hardwood
to horizon**
K.C. Eames

28

**You can go there, but
you can't stay there**
Nesha Pai

44

**The night that
changed
everything**
Debra Kilsheimer

56

The art of becoming
Jeanne Hardy

84

**20 episodes
and counting...**
Sam Hallburn & Candy Bellau

20

**Through a
mother's eyes**
Andrea MacDonald

48

**The weight of chaos,
the shape of grace**
Danielle Hendon

52

**Life, loss, and
the leap forward**
Beth Carter

60

**The weight of
belonging**
Questian Telka

64

**The river knows
the way**
Megan Leesley

77

**I was scared,
but I did it anyway**
Twyla Verhelst

FAMILY LIFE

Never miss an issue of Élevé

This second edition celebrates women whose lives have been reshaped by love, loss, resilience, and reinvention. These are voices that remind us how profoundly experience can alter our paths, and how joy, passion, and creativity carry us forward.

Don't let this be the last time you feel seen, inspired, or moved. Subscribe now for exclusive access to future editions. We're only getting started, and you're on the list.

Want to be featured in the next edition?

We're always seeking powerful stories of courage, reinvention, family, creativity, or even the passions that keep you grounded. If there's a story, passion, or turning point that's defined your path, we want to hear it. Reach out directly to Haley Kershner at haley@sayanchor.com.

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Elevé

WHAT IS ELEVÉ?

In French, *elevé* means elevated. Uplifted. Raised up. That's the spirit behind this magazine—a celebration of the humans behind the spreadsheets.

Produced by Anchor, the same team building technology to simplify B2B payments, *Elevé* is our way of honoring the stories, passions, and full lives of the people who power this industry.

We believe in great software, but more than that, we believe in people. This is *Elevé*. You're exactly where you're meant to be.

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Shea Keats

Sharrin Fuller

Brittany Brown

Julie DeLong

Monique Swansen

Twyla Verhelst



Letter From the Editor

This issue feels different.

From the very beginning, my vision for Elève has been to tell the stories that live beyond job titles. Stories of people as whole, complicated, vibrant human beings. For this issue, I chose to focus entirely on elevating the voices of inspirational women in our industry. It felt important to create space for them, to celebrate their resilience, honesty, and the deeply personal truths they shared with me.

Interviewing them was more than work. It was a privilege. I carried their stories with me long after our calls ended, thinking about the little details they shared and the bigger lessons within them. Each conversation reminded me that strength can take many forms. It can be steady,

tender, or bold, but it is always deeply human.

This issue is not only about who these women are, but also about the life experiences that altered the trajectory of their lives. My hope is that as you read, you feel the same mix of strength and tenderness that I felt while listening. Because what you will find in these pages is not just what these women do, but the moments that shaped them into who they are. And that is what makes this issue so meaningful to me.

Thank you to each of them for trusting me with their stories. And thank you, as always, for reading.

***With heart,
Haley Kershner,**
Customer Marketing Manager, Anchor*

Unfollow the Rules *by Sharrin Fuller*

“Failure is not the opposite of success; it’s the pathway to it.”



I wrote *Unfollow the Rules* because I was tired of the glossy highlight reels of entrepreneurship. You know the kind, the “we scaled to seven figures in twelve months” stories that make everyone else feel like they are failing if their business does not look perfect. That is not my story. My story is messy. It is burnout, bad decisions, scaling too fast, hiring the wrong people, taking on the wrong clients, and building businesses that looked good on paper but drained the life out of me.

This book is about what happens when you stop following the rules that do not serve you and start building differently. It is not a five-step formula, and it is not a fairy tale. It is proof that you can fail, rebuild, and finally create a business that gives you your life back.

What you will find in these pages is raw honesty, humor, and practical lessons you can actually use. It is the truth about what it takes to build a business that works, and how freedom is possible when you stop chasing busy and start chasing better.

**Passage (Excerpt from Chapter 9:
The F Word – Failing Publicly, Often,
and Loudly)**

Let’s talk about the F word.

Not the one I yell when I stub my little toe or spill boxed wine on the couch.

The other one. The one nobody on LinkedIn likes to admit: Failure.

Failure has been my constant companion as an entrepreneur. I wore it like a badge, carried it like baggage, and eventually learned to use

it like a compass. In the early days, I thought success meant being flawless. I assumed the people I admired had it all figured out and never made the mistakes I was making at 2 a.m. in my office, surrounded by empty energy drink cans and a stack of files I did not know how I was going to get through. What I did not understand then was that failure was not the opposite of success; it was the pathway to it. Every single person I envied had a pile of failures behind them: they just did not talk about it as loudly. Everybody wants to talk about their wins. Their highlight reels. Their fancy award plaques and magazine features. Their “we scaled to 7 figures in 12 months” stories. But nobody wants to talk about the wreckage. Nobody wants to talk about the deals that tanked, the clients that drained them, or the people they hired who made them want to set their laptop on fire.

Well, I am not everybody.

I have failed more than most people will admit out loud. And not cute little “oopsies.” I am talking about expensive, humiliating, loud failures that made me want to crawl under a rock. The kind of failures where you do not sleep for days, where you cry in the shower, where you wonder if maybe you should just go get a “normal job” and stop torturing yourself.

But here is the truth. Those failures are the reason I am still here. Every single one forced me to build safeguards, create systems, and grow a backbone. They became the playbook for everything that worked later.

So, in the spirit of full transparen-

cy, let me walk you through one of the loudest, most painful fails of my career.

**FAIL #1: The \$30,000 Client Who
Never Paid**

Back in my SOS days, I thought I could handle anything. My firm was growing. I was landing bigger clients. I thought, “If I can clean up one nightmare, I can clean up all of them.” That is when this client landed in my inbox. He had six companies. All tangled together like a bowl of spaghetti someone dropped on the floor. Each one had its own books, its own debts, and a collection of hard-money loans that did not make sense to anyone but him.

Oh, and payroll? He was running it on QuickBooks Desktop. Not just any Desktop, but one that was not even connected to the internet. It was like stepping back into 1999. I half expected him to hand me a floppy disk.

He hired us to clean up his year-end payroll so we could file his quarterly reports, do the annuals, and crank out W-2s and 1099s. The whole thing was such a disaster that we could not even quote it. We went hourly, because there was no way to guess how bad it really was.

And wow, it was bad.

Every time we opened one file, another three fell apart. Missing filings. Incorrect withholdings. Accounts that did not reconcile to anything. It was like playing whack-a-mole with financial Landmines.

But here is the kicker. Every time we made progress, he found a new excuse not to pay. “I will pay you when xyz is

finished.” “Let’s just get this last piece done first.” I did not want to lose the money we had already billed, so I kept going.

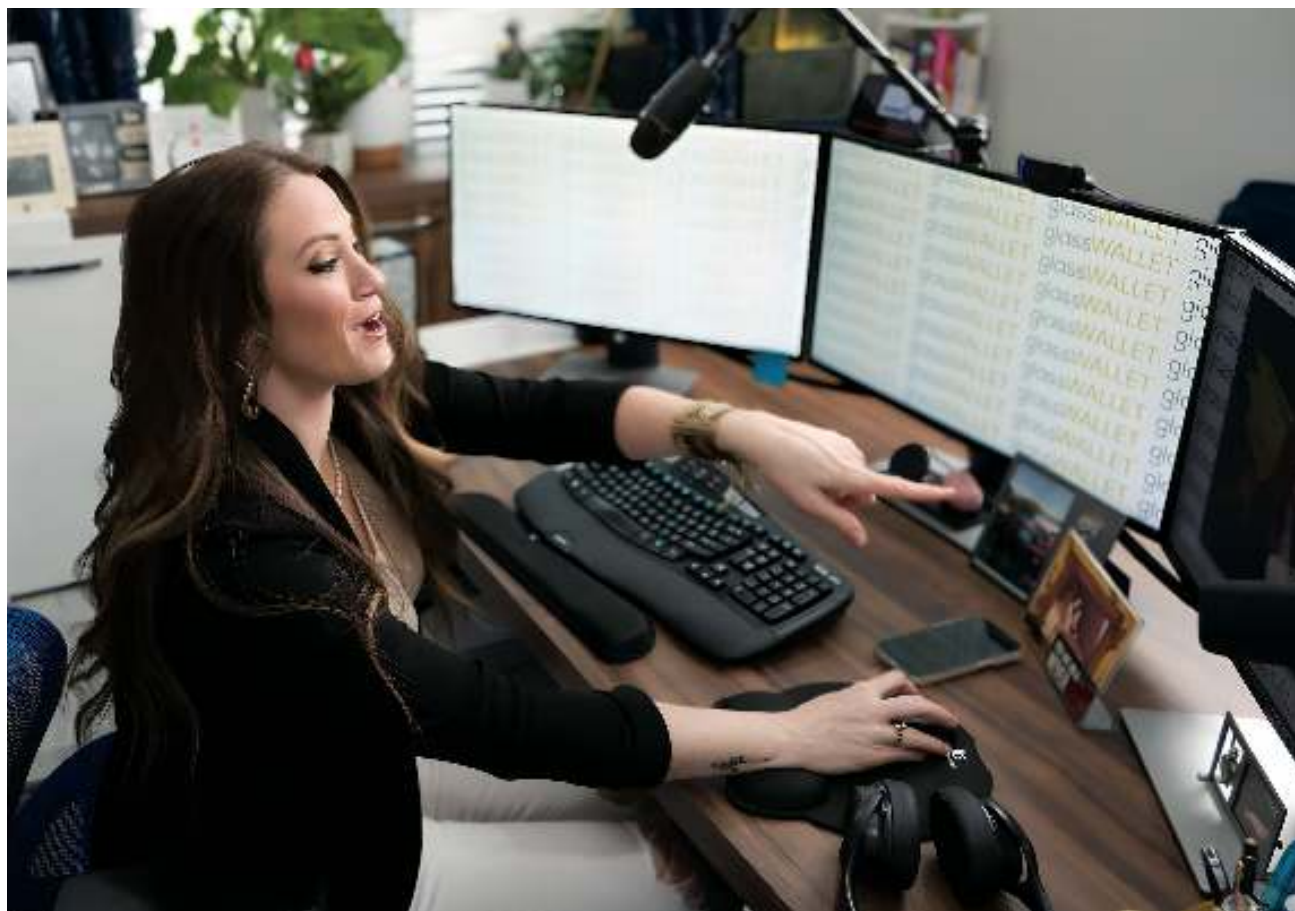
By the time we hit \$30,000 in billables, reality slapped me across the face. This man had no intention of paying us. Worse, he was not just stiffing me. He was not paying his payroll taxes either. We discovered over \$300,000 in collected payroll

taxes that he had never sent to the IRS. And he flat-out refused to let us file any of the reports or send in the W-2s or 1099s. That was the line for me. I was not just dealing with a messy client. I was enabling fraud. And I was not about to go down with that ship. We had to call him out. We had to report him. And we lost every dime of that \$30,000.

Do you know how much \$30,000

hurt at that point in my business? It was not just numbers on a screen. That was months of payroll. That was breathing room I did not have. That was money I desperately needed. He eventually filed for bankruptcy and lost everything, but that did not put one penny back in my account. I was the idiot who saw the red flags and kept going anyway.

Lesson Learned: Never ignore your gut just because you are afraid to lose what you have already put in. That is the sunk-cost trap. If you feel it in your bones that something is wrong, stop. Walk away. Thirty grand is a hell of a price to pay for that lesson, but I never forgot it.



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The women rewriting the rules of work

Shea Keats

Michelle Röse



Michelle Röse had dreamed of owning her own business. She had the skills, the experience, and the energy. But the more she looked into it, the more impossible it felt.

There were liability insurance policies to figure out. Legal structures that seemed overwhelming. So many small details that piled up until the weight became too heavy to carry.

“All the momentum and enthusiasm I had for wanting to go out on my own just slowly trickled away,” she says now. “I thought maybe business ownership just wasn’t for me.”

It’s a moment so many people can relate to, the dream you can see clearly but can’t quite reach. And yet, Michelle’s story didn’t end there.

Because just as she was ready to set the dream aside, she crossed paths with two people who would change everything:

CPA Kristen Keats and former CEO Martin Mole. They had the bones of an idea. Michelle added her expertise in finance. And soon after, Shea Keats joined.

“Shea was the perfect bow on top,” Michelle recalls. Shea brought something vital: a set of leadership principles written at the very beginning. They weren’t flashy. They weren’t complicated. They were clear. They were human. Six years later, those principles still guide Breakaway Advising. “Every decision we make goes through those principles,” Michelle says. “They still stand.”

That’s how Breakaway was born, not as a corporate experiment, but as a workplace built on belonging.

Belonging at the center

From the start, Breakaway wasn’t interested in chasing trends or slogans. There were no glossy posters declaring values. No hashtags designed to go viral. The question was simpler: do people feel comfortable here?

“We’re not interested in performative DEI,” Shea explains. “We care about whether Victoria feels comfortable as a Black woman in our organization.”

That focus shows up in stories that reveal what belonging looks like.

There was the advisor who had gone by Stacey for years, not because she wanted to, but because colleagues said Saheee, her Korean name, was too hard to pronounce. At Breakaway, she reintroduced herself as Saheee. No apology. No hesitation.

There was the divorced mom who had been told by others to hide her family life. Hide her kids. Hide her age. She believed she had to edit herself to be respected. At Breakaway, she was told the opposite. Show who you are. Bring your story. She cried when she realized she no longer had to hide.

And then the new mother. She muted her microphone during a call because her baby was crying. Breakaway told her not to apologize. Feed your baby. Stay on camera. No shame.

Moments like these aren’t just workplace anecdotes. They’re turning points. Proof that the culture really means what it says.

“Work doesn’t have to erase who you are. You don’t need to trade your identity for a paycheck.”

The numbers tell a different story

Accounting has always been a field where women start strong but rarely make it to the top. Sixty-one percent of graduates are women. But when you look at partners in firms, the number drops to 27 percent. Somewhere along the way, the ladder breaks.

Breakaway is different. Here, 67 percent of ownership belongs to women.

And it’s not just ownership. Advisors at Breakaway work an average of 30 hours per week, compared to the grueling 60-hour norm in traditional firms. They also earn more: \$113,000 on average compared to \$74,000 nationally.

“This isn’t a side hustle,” Shea says firmly. “It’s a very real living.”

For women who have been told for decades that they need to sacrifice family time or personal health just to succeed, these numbers don’t just represent money. They represent dignity. Balance. The ability to live a full life while building a career.

Overcoming bias

Still, the stereotypes are stubborn.

At industry conferences, Shea remembers a time someone couldn't "fathom that this company was run by two younger women." The assumption is often the same: two "nice women" running a passion project versus an actual business. Not leaders of a fast-growing, revenue-funded firm.

"It still surprises people," Shea admits.

But Breakaway's track record speaks louder than assumptions. Advisors have helped clients grow from café napkin ideas to becoming the fourth-largest footwear company in the world. They've scaled businesses, supported families, and built something that lasts.

It's not a passion project. It's proof.

Stories that stay with you

Numbers tell part of the story. But the real heart

of Breakaway

lives in the stories

of its people. Saehee reclaim-

ing her name. The divorced mom finally being told she doesn't need to hide.

The new mother who fed her baby on camera, with no apology necessary.

"These stories

stay with you," Michelle says quietly.

They're small on the surface, but they matter in ways that are hard to measure. They remind people that work doesn't have to erase who you are. That you don't need to trade your identity for a paycheck. That being yourself is not a liability.

And when you've spent years being told to fit into a mold that doesn't reflect you, moments like these can be life-changing.

A model that opens doors

Breakaway is women-led, yes. But its impact reaches further.

Fathers join because they want to coach soccer instead of missing it. Military spouses join because the model allows them to take work wherever they go. Older professionals join because they've been told they're past their prime, but here, they thrive.

And Breakaway made one of its boldest decisions early on: it became the only franchise in the nation with no franchise fee. That means ownership isn't only for people with capital. It's for anyone willing to step in and lead.

"We put our money where our mouth is," Michelle says.

That choice removes barriers that keep so many people locked out. It says: You belong here.



Redefining success

Ask Shea what success looks like, and she won't talk about revenue or titles. She'll ask a different question: "On your 80th birthday, what are people going to slow clap you for?" It's an image that sticks. A slow clap, a room full of

family, friends, and colleagues telling the story of your life.

Maybe it's about scaling a business. Maybe it's about camping trips with your kids. Maybe it's about living without apology.

For Breakaway, success is all of those things.

Career and life. Work and joy. Not one instead of the other, but both together.

And that may be the most powerful part of their story.

"Belonging isn't a slogan. It's the culture."



A woman with long, wavy brown hair and a bright smile is standing on a sandy beach. She is wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket over a black top. The background is a soft-focus view of the ocean and sky.

**From
hardwood**

to horizon:

*K.C. Eames discovers
the rhythm of the sand*

K.C. Eames started playing indoor volleyball at 10 years old, and it rapidly became an all-consuming passion that she took on with the kind of discipline and drive that left little space for anything else. Club seasons bled into high school varsity seasons for year-round training and competition. Her club team's success carried her to the Junior Olympics at 14, 15, and 16 years old. For most young athletes, it was a dream come true. For her, it was also a countdown.

The college recruiting calls came, but so did exhaustion. "My knees were shot," she recalls. "I couldn't imagine playing at that high level for another four years." Walking away from sport was necessary. She told herself she was retired, traded the endless practices for a college experience without sports, and tried to settle into a life where competition didn't define her. But the itch never left. Every now and then, she'd drift back into a gym for open play, feeling both the pull of the game and the sting of its limitations. The body that had carried her through years of competition always hurt on the hard court. Indoor wasn't sustainable. And yet, something in her still longed for the rhythm.

Finding the sand

The reset came after a move to Seattle. Her boyfriend, also an indoor volleyball player, suggested they try beach volleyball. It was a casual first encounter, and incredibly humbling. Running and jumping in sand brings a totally new element to the game. The footwork is different; the strategy is a whole new puzzle to figure out. In indoor volleyball, six teammates share the load – in beach there are only two on the court. "It was super frustrating transitioning my indoor

training to the beach," she admits. But it wasn't long for the frustration to give way to a rekindled passion.

What started as just messing around on a sand court one day, turned into an obsession. Eight years later, summers mean playing four or five days a week. Tournaments take her across the West: Denver, Salt Lake City, Seattle, and California. Even winters find her chasing the sand, stepping into warehouse courts in cities that have built indoor beaches for year-round play.

A new game theory

The differences between indoor and beach are more than surface. Six-on-six is pure speed and power. Specialization defines the positions: setter, outside hitter, middle blocker, libero. On the beach, well roundedness prevails. "You have to be good at everything," Eames explains – serving, passing, setting, attacking, defending. That completeness is both daunting and addictive. The strategy shifts, too.

It becomes as much a cerebral game as a physical one, where finesse, placement, and anticipation can outplay the hardest hitting teams. This complexity keeps her hooked. It challenges her body without breaking it, and it forces her to keep learning. Burnout turned into curiosity. The game became sustainable again, but also endlessly new.

Rituals of presence

Unlike many athletes, Eames doesn't have superstitions or elaborate pre-match rituals. What she has is a mindset. At 15 years old, mistakes unraveled her. One mistake became two, then three, and quickly spiraled into a negative mindset that dragged into the next play. As she's matured, she's learned to reset. "If you shank a ball, just take a mental note for what to correct, but move on. This next point is fresh and new."

That discipline has carried into the rest of her life. In work and life, there are no blueprints, missteps are



inevitable. Volleyball gave her the resilience to face them. “Not every day is going to be easy, and I’m not always going to know exactly how to do something. But I don’t shy away from new challenges because that’s part of growth.”

Shifting partners, adapting play

Beach volleyball is as much about chemistry as it is about skill. Professionals might stay with one partner for several seasons in a row, but for Eames, the mix has been fluid. “You might play a few seasons with one

“Watching women in their forties and fifties compete — some of them mothers — and still dominate is incredible to me.”

partner, and then find that you’ve outgrown each other,” she says. She often finds and plays with different partners in different cities. The variety has sharpened her adaptability. Every new partner means adjusting sets, altering tempo, and learning to optimize the partnership

and chances of winning. It’s demanding, but also expansive. Playing with different people has pushed her to evolve, to avoid stagnation. “It pushes me to get better.”

A community like no other

At many of these beach tournaments, amateurs and professionals share the same sand. The pros aren’t cordoned off. They’re warming up on the next court. Eames has joined clinics and camps run by pros and met several Olympians. It’s unthinkable in most professional sports and yet intrinsic





“Every point is a fresh beginning.”

to this one.

That openness shapes the culture. Casual, sun-soaked, a little rebellious. “There aren’t many other pro sports where you have that close connection to the top athletes,” she says.

Inspiration in unexpected places

At 5’9”, Eames fits the archetype of the tall athlete. She also plays soccer and dabbled in track and field, competing in events such as discus, shot put, long jump, triple jump, and high jump. But volleyball was always the throughline.

Her true role models, though, aren’t the names on highlight reels. They’re the friends she plays with. Women in their late thirties and forties, mothers who have returned to the sport after pregnancy, and raising young children, who have reclaimed the strength and agility of their younger days and find time to prioritize this shared passion. She’s impressed with those women who still compete

fiercely at this stage in life. “It’s incredible to me,” she says, awed.

Playing forever

For Eames, the future isn’t about retiring into coaching. It’s about longevity. She recounts the delight of her first “Dinosaur Tournament,” where partners must add up to at least 75 years in the women’s division, and 85 for men. She played with a 42-year-old teammate, facing women in their fifties who outsmarted them.

It was humbling but also inspiring. Game smarts can trump speed and strength. “I can keep playing as long as I want,” she insists. Even as the body slows, the game offers other ways to win.

To that end, she trains daily. Soccer, cycling, weightlifting, and sessions with a personal trainer are her constants. “I want the strongest body I can have for as long as possible. If I don’t move, I’m agitated and irritable. It’s just a part of my identity.”

The calling of play

Perhaps her most profound reflection is this: sports aren’t only for youth. In college, she believed otherwise, drifting without a game to anchor her. Finding beach volleyball changed that. It reminded her that passion can evolve, that games can be lifelong companions rather than childhood phases.

She’s seen it again with pickleball, a new obsession picked up in the fall, where rapid improvement fuels her joy. She encourages others to rediscover the movement they loved as kids or find something new that lights them up. “Adults forget sometimes,” she says. “But you can still pursue new hobbies, still play.”

What began as a story of burnout is now a blueprint for sustainable passion. Volleyball didn’t end; it transformed. And on the sand, under open skies, K.C. Eames plays on every point a new beginning.

Through a mother's eyes

Andrea MacDonald



There is a peculiar vertigo that arrives when your children develop what Andrea MacDonald calls their “man voices.” One morning you are reminding them to pick up wet towels; the next, they’re wearing wedding bands, signing mortgage papers, and speaking to you about interest rates.

Andrea is in the season of life when your kids are, as she put it, “grown grown.” Both sons married this year. One of them, Eric, who now works beside her, troubleshooting client issues and asking the kind of questions that leap two steps ahead. The other, fiercely independent, just bought a house.



The better life we imagine for them

Andrea grew up squarely middle class, the kind of home where there was enough, until, suddenly, there wasn't. Her parents, loving and human, were not good with money. It's almost comical, she says, that she became an accountant; for years, she struggled with the very patterns she now helps clients untangle. “I just wanted a different starting line for my kids,” she tells me. “No debt spiral, no waiting on a tax refund to breathe.”

She also wanted time, time they wouldn't feel obliged to rush. “I was married at nineteen, a mom at twenty, then again at twenty-one,” she says. “Babies having babies.” She doesn't romanticize the grit required. Nor does she regret it. But she hoped her sons might build a foundation first. They did. Jobs, marriages, a house, “in the proper order,” she laughs, half-teasing herself.

The years you miss, and the ones you make

Andrea didn't start college until after both boys were born. She worked full-time, then sprinted to campus for night classes (there were no online options), returning home long after bedtime. She shared custody after separating from their father when the boys were six and five, and then work asked for more: four straight months out of town during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. “From the other side, I can see the gaps,” she admits. “Entire chunks I didn't get to witness.”

Mothers
track of
the missed
the phone
too late.
raised
to tell her
remember

*“I just wanted a
different starting
line for my kids.
No debt spiral,
no waiting on
a tax refund to
breathe.”*

tend to keep
the almos-
field days,
calls returned
Andrea has
sons willing
they don't
it that way.

They remember swim meets and cross-country races; the drive-through dinners; the stubborn, bright thread of presence in whatever minutes she could wring from the day. They remember a mother advancing, visibly, toward a life that would carry them, too.

The day the mother becomes a woman again

Ask any woman who has loved, married young, and then unstitched the life she knew: there is a second coming-of-age. Andrea's arrived at twenty-seven, when she and her first husband, “good parents, wrong marriage,” untangled with unusual grace. They agreed on week-on/week-off



custody while the temperature was still low. And then came the shock of the quiet: the first Tuesdays she didn't cook for anyone; the first Thursdays when nobody needed a ride. "I cried an entire week at a time," she says. "I couldn't eat. Then, slowly, I remembered I existed."

There were harder recalibrations. Health issues in her late twenties led to a hysterectomy. She had already decided not to have more children, "I couldn't imagine a child at home full-time while my boys were there only half the time", but the permanence of a choice removed, she says, "landed like a stone."

Work as a love language

Her first job was at twelve, a paper route, and she's worked ever since. Even now, with sons who can afford to say no, she is most proud that they don't. "Work ethic. And being good humans," she says, listing the two values she drilled with a steady, midwestern cadence. The delight is that the lesson stuck. They are generous without being performative;

curious without being cynical. When Eric joined her firm in 2020, he took the worst seat in the house, the front desk, then started asking questions two and three moves ahead of what anyone had taught him. She watched his mind catch fire. "Someone," she jokes, "raised this guy right."

The women they chose (and what that tells us)

There is an invisible barometer in a mother's heart, and it calibrates on the people our children love. Both sons married special education teachers they've known since high school: all four swam on the same teams years ago. The families are already close. The four of them gather for dinners on random weeknights, no occasion required. In a world where so many people feel disconnected, that kind of closeness feels rare and special.

Andrea beams at the symmetry, then grins at the chaos she's hoping for next. "I have so much mom energy," she says. "I'm ready to funnel it straight into grandma energy."



On advice she gives

Married at nineteen, mother at twenty, people had opinions... but she barely heard the noise. "I was too young and cocky to care," she says, not unkindly. Perhaps that was a grace. She made choices; she lived them; she learned. If she could give other women one piece of advice, it would be this:

"Don't overthink it. Kids are really resilient. You're going to mess up sometimes, just treat them well, do your best, and know they'll remember that more than the bad nights. The hard stuff passes, and before you know it, they're grown and out there living their own lives."

What remains

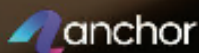
Across the conference table, her son unravels a client's knot that once would have cost her a weekend. He listens first, then triangulates quickly, an instinct she recognizes as her own. The younger one carries a different kind of brilliance, a stubborn competence that fixes problems before anyone has time to applaud. And then there's the state swim meet, the walk-out song "Let It Go," of all things, that brought the house to its feet because a teenage boy chose delight over cool.

They grow up. They grow away. And then, if you're very lucky, they grow back, bringing with them the lives once imagined for them, all the while reminding us to keep imagining one for ourselves.

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A dark, moody photograph of a room interior. In the foreground, a tall, thin plant with long, dark leaves stands in a white pot. To the right, a wooden table holds a blue book and a small potted plant. The background is dark and out of focus.

Michelle Mitchell

The decade she stayed silent



Michelle Mitchell was 42 when her life tilted. One moment she was in the grocery store, pulling a gallon of milk from the cooler. The next, she realized something was terribly wrong.

"The milk felt warm," she recalls. She swapped it for another. Still warm. A third. Same thing. Only when she picked it up with her other hand did she understand, she couldn't feel temperature in her right hand at all. Days later, she couldn't feel water on her skin in the shower. A puppy's scratch left no sensation.

Her husband rushed her to the ER. Tests followed: MRI scans, bloodwork, then a spinal tap at the Cleveland Clinic. The diagnosis came quickly, multiple sclerosis.

"I had no idea what was going on. Fear came up first," she says. "What is this? How is it going to impact me?"

Starting a business in secret

The timing couldn't have been worse. Michelle had just launched her own bookkeeping business. Instead of celebrating a new chapter, she was terrified her clients would see her as incapable.

"I didn't want them to know that I had a health issue going on," she admits. "I wanted them to know that I was capable of taking care of their books and doing the things that I had agreed to with them."

So she made a choice: silence. For ten years, she told no clients and not even her employees. Only her husband and children knew.

"I didn't want to give the disease any energy. I didn't want to give it any life in my life."

Boundaries and balance

In those early years, Michelle managed by setting strict limits. Client visits, still the norm in 2010, were carefully rationed. Rest was scheduled like an appointment. Stress, which can trigger flare-ups, had to be kept in check.

"It was about managing my energy," she explains. "Certain dates, certain hours, and when I was done, I had to rest. I couldn't overcommit myself."

At home, her husband stepped in. The family adjusted. Her kids, then in elementary and high school, asked if she was going to die. "That was hard," she says softly. "MS is not a death sentence. But if you don't keep the progression under control, it can affect your lungs, your heart, your cognitive ability. We all had to learn together."

A decade of silence

For ten years, Michelle kept her secret. Not until 2020 did she finally tell her team why she worked the way she did, why her availability was different, why boundaries mattered.

"My team has just been rock stars," she says.

"They were like, of course, we will protect your time. We will help you manage that."

When she eventually began telling clients, she realized her fear had been misplaced. "They were caring people. They cared about me as a person first." By then, she had built a strong team to support her work.

Life beyond business

MS didn't just reshape Michelle's company. It changed her definition of success.

"Before, success was income, status, what you have," she says. "Now, my metric of success is how much freedom I have. Life is short, and you should be enjoying your 24 hours, not just one or two weeks of vacation."

It also reshaped her friendships. Support came in the form of meals, offers of help, understanding. Learning to say yes to those gestures wasn't easy. "For a person with a chronic illness, sometimes you just have to accept when people offer," Michelle explains. "It makes your life better when you do."

The mindset shift

Living with MS has given her empathy, not just for herself but for others. "A lot of times people with chronic pain come across as short or angry," she says. "I try to give people grace. There could be something underlining that they don't even know is causing their emotions. Having MS taught me to lead with understanding."

It also sharpened her boundaries. “As women, we take on the weight of everybody else,” she reflects. “With MS, I just couldn’t. I had to set limits.”

That shift became a guiding philosophy. Her mornings now begin slowly, with stretches and journaling. Exercise happens later in the day, when her body is ready. Regular massages keep fatigue at bay. She leans on technology to conserve energy, recording client meetings instead of scribbling notes. Vacations are frequent and non-negotiable.

Speaking the truth out loud

For a decade, Michelle’s diagnosis remained private. Then came her first public admission, on stage at Scaling New Heights.

“I was so nervous,” she recalls. Her session was about stepping away from your business, and she anchored it with her own reality: “I have multiple sclerosis. I’ve been hospitalized. When

I was new in business, my business stopped. I had to figure out how to move forward and stay in business while managing this disease.”

The audience gasped. Some said, “You don’t look like you have MS.” Michelle met it with calm truth: “I don’t look like what I’ve been through. But I’ve been through a lot.”

The reaction affirmed her choice to finally speak out. “Even if you’re going through a lot, you don’t have to look like it. You can overcome it. That’s really the message.”

Fifteen years later, the diagnosis is still with her, but so is the life she’s built, family, business, friendships, freedom.

“A diagnosis doesn’t have to define who you are as a person,” she says. “You can overcome it. And it’s okay to ask for help, and it’s okay to receive it.”



You can go there, but you can't stay there: How one woman fought back from heartbreak and breast cancer

Nesha Pai



At the start of 2024, life looked bright for Nesha Pai. She had finally checked off a lifelong dream: three months living in Paris, working remotely, soaking in the art, fashion, and everyday magic of the city she'd fallen in love with as a teenager.

"It was a sabbatical, a time to reset and dream bigger," Nesha recalls. She returned home brimming with ideas, determined to bring that energy into her life and her firm.

But within weeks, her world shifted.

A phone call that changed everything

While celebrating her son's 25th birthday on their favorite beach in early June, Nesha's brother called with news that shattered her: their younger sister, just 45, had died suddenly of a heart attack.

"It was like the sand swallowed me whole," she says. "She was fine that morning, on the phone with clients, taking her kids to school. And then she was gone."

Nesha and her brother spent the summer caring for their parents; her sister had been their primary support, while grieving themselves. And just as she thought she'd have time to process, another shock came.

The diagnosis no one expected

On her last day with her parents, Nesha got a call from her doctor: her routine mammogram showed stage one breast cancer.

"I felt like I was in the twilight zone," she says. "No history, no genetics, nothing in our family. And suddenly it was me."

She spent the rest of 2024 in treatment, surgery and radiation, mercifully no chemo. By December 23, she rang the bell, exhausted but triumphant.

The week before, she'd even been hit by a FedEx truck crossing to the hospital. She laughs now: "I told myself, you are not making me late to radiation!"

Finding resilience

Through grief, cancer, and sheer exhaustion, Nesha leaned on her philosophy of resilience, one she now shares in keynote speeches.

"A coach once told me: you can go there, but you can't stay there," she explains. "It's okay to feel the sadness. It's okay to let yourself break. But don't live there forever. Life has too much to offer."

A return to Paris, a promise kept

In spring 2025, Nesha returned to Paris, carrying her sister with her. The last time they'd been together was in that city, just months before her death, on a trip Nesha now considers divinely timed.

"We had the best week of our lives," she says. "I know now it was a gift." This time, she held a small ceremony in her sister's memory, a healing act she plans to repeat each year.

Building a life she loves

Soon after, Nesha bought a beach condo on the same shore where she'd received the devastating call about her sister, and where her son, feels happiest.

"It's healing," she says. "It's my place to rest, to breathe, to live outside the hustle."

She runs a boutique accounting firm she built from her kitchen table after walking out on a toxic boss in 2011. Today, with just two team members, she serves 80 clients. The firm gives her freedom to live the life she wants, not chained to an office, not defined

by others' expectations.

"When I first started, male colleagues laughed at me," Nesha remembers.

"They said, what do you mean you don't have an office downtown? Today, I've blown them out of the water.

Believe in yourself. Even when no one else does."

Life's hardest seasons can lead to its brightest chapters

Looking back, Nesha says 2024 nearly broke her, but it also remade her.

"I watched my sister build this empire, and she left it all behind," she reflects. "It taught me: we don't take any of it with us. So spend the money. Take the trip. Love your people.

Choose joy."

For Nesha, resilience isn't about denying hardship. It's about embracing it, learning from it, and deciding, again and again, to live fully.

"Every day is temporary," she says. "The good, the bad. And when you know that, you keep going."



Heather Satterley

In the company of horses

Love at first sight

Heather doesn't hesitate when asked what first drew her to horses. "It was love at first sight," she says. She was the child who pressed her face to the car window on long drives, pointing and shouting at every horse in a field.

Her father owned one, so Heather grew up with access that most children only dream of. She learned to brush their coats, feel their warmth, and listen to the soft exhale of a giant animal as it lowered its head. "From far away, they look like they're just eating grass," she explains. "But when you're around them consistently, you see their personalities. They're as complex as dogs."

Marley, the dream realized

Owning her own horse once felt like a childhood fantasy, until a women's leadership class changed everything. At Ellivate Alliance, participants were asked to list the dreams they'd had as kids. Heather wrote down the first thing that came to mind: own a horse.

The class challenged her to ask if those dreams could still happen. Could she afford it? Would it bring joy? Was it time? "I posted on Nextdoor saying I was a 50-something woman who wanted to own a horse," she says. Soon she was

taking lessons. Within six months, she bought Marley, the same horse she'd been riding in class. "I fell in love with her. I don't think she liked me much at first, but I loved her anyway."

Building a farm, building a life

Marley was boarded for a while, but Heather wanted her closer to home. That dream materialized with the purchase of a small farm in North Stonington, Connecticut. Her days now begin at 5:30 a.m., feeding barn cats, then Marley and Smokey, the Palomino quarter horse she later brought home as Marley's companion. She mucks paddocks, manages pastures, and always hands out "a cookie and a kiss."

The glamour here is the quiet satisfaction of caring for animals. Heather recalls how quickly her horses devoured her new paddock. "It was grass when I moved in. Within a week and a half, it was dirt," she laughs.

Smoky, the golden retriever in horse form

Smokey is stocky, blond, and as endearing as a puppy. "He's like a golden retriever," Heather says. "He doesn't know his own size. He'll run right up to me." Marley, older and wiser, keeps him in line. "People don't always know this, but mares run the show," Heather explains. "She's the alpha."



The herd dynamic is delicate: Marley's food aggression requires a fence between them, but the balance works. "Smokey just wants everyone to love him," she says.

Courage in the paddock

Horses gave Heather more than companionship; they gave her courage. Early on, she was terrified each time she mounted. Trainers warned her: It's not if you fall, it's when. Most riders know broken bones or concussions. "They're 1,100 pounds and you're ten percent of that," she says. For a long time, she hid her fear. To her trainer, she looked calm. Inside, she was panicked. The shift came when she moved Marley to a backyard barn with no staff to lean on. "It was just me. I had to step up," she says. That's when she realized Marley already trusted her, but she hadn't trusted Marley. "Once I did, everything changed. We could do things we'd never done before."

Leadership lessons from the barn

Horses became her greatest teachers. "I've been seen as a leader for years, but I'm a much better leader now," she says. She learned to establish boundaries with love, to remain calm under pressure, and to trust the partnership instead of controlling it.

She also became resourceful. Building a fence for her farm wasn't a luxury to contract out; it was a challenge to solve. "Horse people figure it out," she says. "YouTube videos, elbow grease, whatever it takes."

The rhythm of a day

Heather's mornings follow the rhythm of animals: feed, water, muck, a kiss on the nose.

Lunch break means turnout to graze under her careful watch. Evenings are for grooming, hoof checks, shots, dinner, and sometimes a playful run around the paddock. "Marley will trot alongside me, then turn and gallop back," Heather says. "It's hilarious and adorable." Travel is rare, but possible thanks to Hannah, a farm sitter who once boarded her own horses on the property. "It feels like fate," Heather says.



A life reshaped by horses

Heather speaks candidly about how horses changed her. She faces fears instead of avoiding them. She trusts instead of doubting. She leads with more patience.

She imagines adding a third horse, maybe a mini. She thinks about equine therapy someday. For now, she continues to grow alongside Marley and Smokey, grateful for the lessons in courage, trust, and love.

*"I've been seen as a leader for years,
but I'm a much better leader now—because of the horses."*

Fall cocktails to savor

Crisp evenings call for drinks that feel both cozy and elevated. These recipes combine autumn flavors with a modern twist, making them perfect for gatherings, dinner parties, or a quiet night in.



Maple old-fashioned

The classic, reimagined with autumn richness.

2 oz rye
or bourbon
½ oz pure
maple syrup
2 dashes Angostu-
ra bitters
Orange peel + star
anise, garnish

Directions:

Stir ingredients with ice until chilled. Strain into a rocks glass over one large cube. Express orange peel over the glass and garnish.

Pairs with:

Dark chocolate truffles.



Apple cider bourbon fizz

Bright, warm, and just the right amount of sparkle.

2 oz bourbon
3 oz fresh
apple cider
½ oz lemon juice
Ginger beer, to
top
Cinnamon stick,
garnish

Directions:

Shake bourbon, cider, and lemon juice with ice. Strain into a glass over fresh ice. Top with ginger beer and garnish with a cinnamon stick.

Pairs with:

A sharp cheddar board and honey.



Spiced pear spritz

Lightly sweet, elegant, and celebratory.

1½ oz pear vodka
or pear brandy
½ oz elderflower
liqueur
2 oz prosecco
1 oz club soda
Thin pear slice +
rosemary sprig,
garnish

Directions:

Stir pear vodka and elderflower with ice. Top with prosecco and soda. Garnish with pear and rosemary.

Pairs with:

A pear and walnut salad.



Cranberry thyme gin & tonic

Fresh, tart, and beautifully seasonal.

2 oz gin
2 oz cranberry
juice (unsweet-
ened)
Tonic water, to top
Fresh cranberries
+ thyme sprig,
garnish

Directions:

Pour gin and cranberry juice over ice in a highball glass. Top with tonic and garnish with cranberries and thyme.

Pairs with:

Roasted turkey sliders.



Pumpkin spice white russian

Velvety and indulgent, dessert in a glass.

2 oz vodka
1 oz coffee liqueur
2 oz pumpkin
spice creamer (or
half & half with
pumpkin purée +
pie spice)
Grated nutmeg,
garnish

Directions:

Add vodka and coffee liqueur to a rocks glass with ice. Top with pumpkin spice creamer. Sprinkle with nutmeg.

Pairs with:

Pumpkin pie, of course.



The freedom of far away

Ashley Rhoden

A sidewalk to everywhere
Ashley Rhoden still remembers the sound of her small sneakers on that single sidewalk in Placencia, Belize. It wasn't just pavement. To her child's eyes, it was the axis of a whole world, the only path connecting shops, families, laughter, and possibility. Her parents had taken her, a little girl from the States to this remote fishing village with no cars and no distractions, just sea air and

the steady rhythm of life. That trip was more than a vacation. It was an initiation into freedom.
"There was one sidewalk in Placencia. That was the town. You could run up and down it, and that was the adventure." And if you were lucky enough to venture to the far end of the walk, you'd find epic slabs of chocolate cake at the town's single bakery. After that, Ashley craved more than cake, she craved travel.

The gift her parents gave

Ashley's parents understood there was a big, wide world outside their home. And the gift they offered was an introduction to life beyond their doorstep. Jamaica was one of the first stamps on her passport.
"They didn't give me big things. They gave me trips," she says, with a grateful laugh. "Looking back, that was everything. I wouldn't trade it."
This choice shaped the architecture



of her worldview, her perspective on life. Travel wasn't just an escape, but an education, too. She saw communities where daily life was simple, joy abundant, and family central. Even today, she remembers that sidewalk, a memory that reminds her to walk to the end.

Falling into memory

There is one story Ashley tells with a mix of embarrassment and pride: the cactus. On a dusty dude ranch in New Mexico, she tumbled headfirst into a prickly plant.

"I laugh about it now," she says. "But those things stick with you. The moments that weren't perfect are the ones you actually remember."

That story threads into her larger philosophy: travel doesn't have to be glossy to be transformative. Awkwardness, discomfort, and even acci-

"The moments that weren't perfect are the ones you actually remember."

dents are all part of the narrative that makes a journey memorable.

A collector of islands

Ashley's atlas glitters with the Caribbean.

Barbados, the Cayman Islands, and Turks and Caicos Islands left their imprint. Yet she recalls North Caicos, a secluded outpost being one of the most surprising. There, she found the beauty of stillness. No tourist frenzy, no distractions. Just long verdant-lined roads, pastel houses, and an ocean horizon.

"It was one of those places where you realize how little you actually need," she reflects. "The pace slows you

down whether you want it to or not." This rhythm follows her home. It colors how she approaches work, parenting, and even conversations with strangers. "If you can slow down on a trip, you can learn to slow down in life," she says.

The art of packing light

Ashley is the kind of traveler who refuses to check a bag. For her, agility is power. She keeps a toiletry bag always stocked, ready to slide into her carry-on. A travel pillow, disinfecting wipes, and a minimalist approach are her trademarks.

"I just don't like the idea of waiting for luggage," she says. "It slows you down. If you pack light, you can go anywhere."

Family as compass

Ashley believes travel binds fami-

lies. Her clan takes an annual trip, a tradition that cements connections across generations. They've wandered Europe together, stood on beaches, laughed on long car rides.

"There's something about being in a different place together," she says. "It makes the bond stronger. You see each other outside the usual roles." She values solo trips, too, but the family ones are sacred. They remind her that love is portable, that joy can be carried from island to island, continent to continent.

Looking forward

When asked about dream destinations, her eyes widen. Indonesia, Japan, Costa Rica, New Zealand. The

list is long, but the spirit is consistent. She seeks places that challenge her, places where language and culture are unfamiliar enough to spark wonder.

"Travel keeps me curious," she says.

"It's the thing that keeps me asking questions."

That curiosity is her inheritance.

From a sidewalk in Belize to the cobblestones of Europe, from falling into a cactus to wandering North Caicos, Ashley's story is one of movement.

"If you can slow down on a trip, you can learn to slow down in life."

Gratitude as a final destination

Ashley doesn't close a story without circling back to gratitude. "It's not lost on me how lucky I was," she says. "My parents made choices that gave me the world. I hope I can do the same." For her, gratitude isn't a vague sentiment. It's the ultimate souvenir, the piece of every trip that can be carried home.

And that is where her narrative lands: joy that rises not from perfection or luxury, but from perspective. She still carries them with her: the sidewalk in Belize, the cactus spines, and the laughter with her family in new cities. These are the landmarks that define Ashley Rhoden's map.



Fall mocktails to sip

All the cozy, crisp flavors of fall, without the hangover. These mocktails are proof that the season's best moments can be savored glass in hand, no spirits required.



Harvest apple mule

All the spice of a mule, with fresh orchard vibes.

3 oz apple cider

½ oz lime juice

Ginger beer, to top
Apple slice +
cinnamon stick,
garnish

Directions

Combine cider and lime juice over ice. Top with ginger beer and garnish.

Pairs with:

Warm pretzels and mustard.



Cinnamon pear cooler

Refreshing, gently sweet, and a little unexpected.

3 oz pear nectar

1 oz lemon juice

½ oz cinnamon simple syrup*
Sparkling water, to top

Rosemary sprig, garnish

Directions

Shake pear nectar, lemon juice, and syrup with ice. Strain into a glass, top with sparkling water, and garnish. To make syrup: simmer equal parts sugar + water with 2 cinnamon sticks, then cool.

Pairs with:

Brie and fig crostini.



Pomegranate thyme fizz

Bright jewel tones and layered herbal notes.

3 oz pomegranate juice

½ oz lemon juice

½ oz honey syrup (equal parts honey + water)

Club soda, to top
Fresh thyme sprig, garnish

Directions

Shake juices and honey syrup with ice. Strain into a flute, top with soda, and garnish with thyme.

Pairs with:

Goat cheese tartlets.



Maple chai latte

Comfort in a cup: warm, spiced, and cozy.

6 oz brewed chai tea (hot or iced)

2 oz milk or dairy-free alternative

½ oz maple syrup

Ground cinnamon, garnish

Directions

Stir chai, milk, and maple until blended. Serve hot in a mug or over ice in cubes. Sprinkle with cinnamon.

Pairs with:

Pumpkin bread.



Cranberry rosemary spritz

Simple, festive, and perfect for a toast.

2 oz cranberry juice

1 oz orange juice

½ oz rosemary simple syrup*
Sparkling water, to top

Cranberries + rosemary sprig, garnish

Directions

Combine juices and syrup over ice. Top with sparkling water and garnish. To make syrup: simmer sugar, water, and rosemary sprigs, then strain.

Pairs with:

Holiday cheese board.

Have a good night sleep.



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Finally.







Joy rises to the top

Michelle Röse

Ambition was in Michelle Röse's DNA. In high school, she led clubs, captained sports teams, and gravitated toward leadership roles. In college, she was tapped for honors and leadership programs, marked as someone to watch. A career trajectory was all but certain.

Which is why, when she became a stay-at-home mother, it stunned everyone around her, including herself. She hadn't expected to walk away from her professional ambitions so early. But when her first daughter was born, she chose to stay home and fully invest in raising three girls.

"It was highly demanding in a different way than what my day-to-day looks like now," she reflects. "It was a wonderful learning opportunity for me to grow as a leader and mentor in that capacity."

Those eight years were a gift, but they also carried a shadow. Her husband lost his job, and suddenly, their family, with a college-educated, ambitious young mother at the helm, was on government support. The experience was humbling, disorienting, and far from what she had envisioned. "It was mind-blowing," she admits. "I had always been driven, always expected to succeed, and yet here we were."

A mother's nightmare

As Michelle adjusted to motherhood and financial uncertainty, life delivered another blow. One of her young daughters disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted. Michelle remembers the day with agonizing clarity. Sitting on the couch, she and her husband asked their daughter to explain what had happened, all captured on camera. What spilled out was a detailed, linear account: the where, the when, what was on TV. Her daughter spoke with the calm detachment of a child too young to understand the weight of her words.

Michelle, however, felt her world collapsing around her. "My vision started to close in. I was hearing this buzz, my hearing was going out, and I thought I was going to faint. But I just told myself, 'Fix your face.' Lean in. Let her know you're

here. Give her visual and verbal feedback so she feels safe." That recording went to the police and launched a grueling process. Her daughter had to retell her trauma eight different times: to police officers, doctors, social workers, psychologists, and prosecutors. Eventually, Michelle and her other daughters had to testify in court as well.

The trauma left scars that were hard to see. Her daughter developed post-traumatic stress, episodes of crying and screaming that disrupted her schooling and friendships. Teachers tried strategies designed for ADHD or attention issues, unaware that weighted blankets and heavy backpacks, often used to calm children, were deeply triggering for a child whose body had been violated. Invitations to

birthday parties disappeared. Other parents whispered. "It was very difficult," Michelle recalls. "You really don't know the battles people are fighting."

Healing in motion

The family decided to create their own space for healing. They packed into a truck and trailer and spent six months road-schooling across America's national parks. Mornings were for work and study; afternoons were for hikes, rivers, and barefoot explorations.

Michelle remembers the Grand Tetons, her girls' feet

covered in mud, their laughter spilling into the air. She remembers Lake Powell, where she gave them headlamps and watched their lights dart across hills under a starry sky, hearing them laugh again for the first time in ages. "It was rejuvenating," she says. "We trusted each other again. We were so close in those small quarters, yet so small ourselves compared to the vastness of those landscapes. It gave us serenity."

Divorce and determination

The challenges did not end there. Michelle's marriage broke down, adding divorce to the weight she was already carrying. She found herself navigating single motherhood while trying to rebuild her career after nearly a decade away.



She started from the bottom. An administrative assistant role was all she could get after so many years out of the workforce. She took it, grateful and determined. Within five years, she had worked her way up to CFO, doubling revenues and profits year after year.

Still, she wanted more. She wanted to bring that same impact to as many businesses as possible.

The vote that changed everything

One evening, Michelle sat her daughters down at the dinner table. She explained an opportunity to co-found a new company.

Breakaway. The catch: she would leave her comfortable executive salary and start at zero.

"This is a family decision," she told them. "We may have to go without extras. We may have to be uncomfortable. But I believe in this." She gave them the choice. They voted yes. She promised to give herself six months. She hit her goals in three.

Joy rising

Recognition followed quickly. 40 Under 40. Fastest-growing business awards. A nomination for Executive of the Year. But Michelle resists the idea that these are her victories alone. She shares them with her daughters, who said yes at the dinner table. With her co-founders, who built Breakaway alongside her. With every advisor who, like her, started at zero.

What matters most, though, is not the accolades but the philosophy that carried her through. Michelle calls it her "second mountain," the stage of life where resilience and joy coexist with hardship. She is drawn to people who have endured "extra hard," not because of their pain, but because of their determination to choose joy anyway. "Joy isn't happiness," she explains. "Joy is acknowledging that it sucks to suck, and still finding things to be grateful for."

Even on the days she found herself sobbing on the kitchen floor, she forced herself to pause and name one thing she was grateful for. Then another. Slowly, gratitude pulled her back up.

Passing it forward

Today, Michelle uses her platform to encourage other women, especially mothers who feel trapped in impossi-

ble circumstances, to speak their truth and find a sense of community. "Say it out loud," she urges. "This is really hard for me. This is what I want. This is what I'm going after."

She believes in the power of community to amplify wins

and soften losses. At Breakaway, she has built a culture where advisors share struggles and celebrate together, reminding each other that entrepreneurship is never a solo climb.

If she could go back and speak to her younger self, she would offer compassion. "Hang in there. You're doing the best you can with

the resources you have."

Gratitude as the throughline

Michelle's story holds all the contradictions of a modern life: ambition and sacrifice, devastation and triumph, divorce and reinvention. She has walked through government support, sexual assault, and heartbreak, and emerged leading one of the fastest-growing firms in her field.

Her success is not defined by titles or awards but by her insistence on gratitude. It is the foothold that carried her from the kitchen floor to the boardroom, from exhaustion to empowerment.

In every season, even the darkest, she asked herself to find one thing to be grateful for. And every time, it was enough to keep going.

For Michelle Röse, joy always rises to the top.

This is a family decision. We may have to go without extras. We may have to be uncomfortable. But I believe in this.



The night that changed everything

Debra Kilsheimer

Christmas Eve should have been perfect. For Debra, it was meant to be the first holiday in the new custom home she and her husband had designed themselves, every detail chosen with intention. She had just returned from the grocery store with her young daughter, arms full of food for the feast she would host the next day. The turkey was thawing, vegetables neatly stored in the refrigerator, gifts already tucked beneath the tree. By late afternoon, the rhythm of family life, naps, last-minute preparations, was unfolding as planned.

And then, without warning, everything split in two: before and after.

While her husband and daughter were out running an errand and while her baby son slept in the next room, a man broke into the house. He held a knife. He raped her.

In an instant, the joyful tableau of a young family at Christmas turned into something unrecognizable. The event would ripple through every corner of her life, her marriage, her career, her sense of safety, her very understanding of herself. “I felt like a walking dead person,” Debra remembers. “Like a shell. There was nothing inside.”

The years before

To understand the impact of that night, it helps to know the life Debra had been building up until then.

She grew up in a family where money was carefully tracked and budgets were discussed at the kitchen table. Her grandfather was an accountant, her father a teacher who later became a business manager for one of Pennsylvania’s largest school districts. As the oldest of four children, Debra was raised in a home that was stable, structured, and deeply centered on education.

Her path to accounting was almost accidental. In college, she stumbled into an accounting class because she needed credits. What she discovered was not math, but logic, and she loved it. After graduating, she built a career as a CPA, though she quickly became frustrated with the way firms measured value: time sheets, billable hours, six-minute increments that rewarded inefficiency over brilliance.

“I thought, this doesn’t make sense,” she recalls. “If I’m good at what I do, why should a client pay me less just because it takes me less time?”

Her dissatisfaction pushed her to look for something different. The turning point came when she noticed the tax return of a Mary Kay

sales director. The woman was earning far more than Debra and seemed genuinely happy. Within weeks, Debra left accounting to sell Mary Kay products full-time.

To her surprise, she thrived. She loved the freedom, the possibility, the chance to build something entirely her own. Within months she was earning more money than she had at the firm; within years she was winning awards, cars, and recognition. By her late twenties, she was a top sales director, living the American dream with her husband and two young children. That dream shattered on Christmas Eve.

The day everything broke

It is the ordinary details that still cut deepest. The sound of her toddler's nap-time breathing. The way the turkey sat, half-thawed, on the kitchen counter. The sofa cushion beneath her as she drifted off reading in the late afternoon quiet.

And then, the knife.

The attack itself was brutal, but the aftermath was in some ways even harder. Friends pulled away. Conversations went silent.

People didn't know what to say, so they said nothing. She felt dirty, unwanted, fundamentally broken. "Everyone left," she recalls. "I thought, who would want to be around me? I felt like nothing."

Her marriage unraveled in the months that followed. By the time the divorce papers were signed, she was no longer the ambitious young director obsessed with climbing the Mary Kay ladder. She was a single mother, hollowed out by trauma, uncertain of who she was or where she was going.

Rebuilding from nothing

The first steps back came through music. Debra had played the violin since childhood, and when a community theater asked her to perform for a

production of *The Grapes of Wrath*, she agreed. At the audition, she played in the lobby, unaware that fifty cast members had gathered quietly behind her to listen.

When she finished, the musical director introduced her to the group. "This is our violinist," he announced.

Then a stranger named Mark stepped forward.

"Hi, Debbie," he said. "I'm so glad you're here."

It was the first time in months, perhaps years, that someone had looked her in the eye and made her feel she mattered. She wept. That small kindness began the slow process of piecing herself back together.



Over time, she rebuilt. First teaching attorneys how to use desktop computers, then, after 9/11 cost her that job, she decided to post her own online ad, cheekily titled *I want a boyfriend*. The ad was less about romance and more about connection; she just wanted someone to share dinner or a movie with. Instead, it led her to Hal, a fellow accountant who became not only her business partner but, eventually, her husband.

Finding love again

When she met Hal, she wasn't looking for love, but she found someone who listened, who laughed with her, who respected her ideas. And when her job ended abruptly, Hal invited her to help at his firm. Her only condition: "I'll do it if I can run the accounting part the way I think it should be run."

To his credit, he agreed.

Together they built something radically different from the firms Debra had known, no billable hours, no obsession with receipts, no worship of inefficiency. They were proactive, forward-looking, technology-driven. Their approach was recognized nationally; they became one of Intuit's "Firms of the Future" and Debra herself rose

into thought leadership, speaking at conferences, joining councils, and mentoring others. Along the way, she and Hal fell in love. They married, blending not just their work but their lives. “I always say God might have been asleep the day that man broke into my house, but He woke up when He sent me Hal,” Debra says.

The philosophy that emerged

For all her accolades, what Debra values most is not titles or awards, it’s the way she now approaches people. The Christmas Eve attack could have left her bitter or permanently broken. Instead, it sharpened her sense of empathy. She remembers how one man simply calling her by name in a theater lobby made her feel seen, alive again. Now she carries that lesson everywhere. “You matter,” she tells colleagues, clients, and audiences. “Remember people’s names. See them. Make them feel important.”

Her philosophy is rooted in what she calls “Uncomfortable Curiosity,” the willingness to ask questions others avoid, to speak truths that

might make people squirm. It is also anchored in resilience: the belief that everyone faces something unthinkable, and that the choice is whether to remain a victim or become a victor. “I wish I didn’t have to go through what I went through,” she admits. “But I like who I am because of it.”

The trauma never disappears, but it no longer defines her. Instead, she lets it fuel her insistence on joy, on connection, on treating clients as if they were guests at a fine dining restaurant rather than numbers on a ledger.

Her message, sharpened by survival, is simple: Don’t wait for Friday at five to live your life.

Don’t measure your worth by hours billed or money earned. Life can change in a moment, on an ordinary December afternoon, with a turkey thawing on the counter.

So live now. See people. Remember their names. Make them feel important.

Because you never know which ordinary moment will be the one that changes everything.

“Don’t wait for Friday at five to live your life. Don’t measure your worth by hours billed or money earned.”



Editor's shelf

Books to inspire, comfort, and spark conversation.

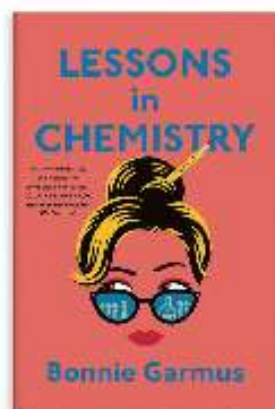
Fall is the season for curling up with words that warm the spirit and challenge the mind. This quarter's shelf blends fiction, memoir, and practical wisdom, books that travel easily from your nightstand to your carry-on.



The Comfort Book

by Matt Haig

A tender, pocket-sized guide to being gentle with yourself. Haig's reflections remind us that it's okay to slow down, take up space, and notice small moments of joy. It feels like a friend reaching for your hand on the hardest days.



Lessons in Chemistry

by Bonnie Garmus

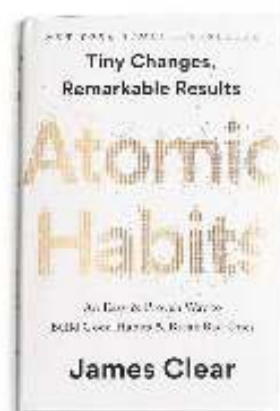
Elizabeth Zott is not your typical heroine. Witty, sharp, and unwilling to bend to convention, she teaches us that reinvention can happen at any age, even in the most unexpected ways. This is fiction that makes you laugh, cry, and rethink what's possible.



Braiding Sweetgrass

by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Lyrical and wise, Kimmerer braids Indigenous knowledge with scientific insight, inviting us to see nature as both teacher and kin. A book best savored slowly, like tea on a rainy morning.



Atomic Habits

by James Clear

The ultimate reset. Clear's framework for tiny, consistent changes feels especially timely in the fall, when we crave structure and routine before the year's close.

Pro tip: Pair your read with a playlist. A soft jazz soundtrack can turn any reading corner into a personal escape.



The weight of chaos, the shape of grace

Danielle Hendon

Danielle Hendon lives in motion. Mornings and afternoons trace the same coordinates: pool lanes, bleachers, the hum of chlorine. Her son is fifteen, her daughter thirteen. Two teenagers, one boy, one girl. Both swimmers, both wrapped in adolescence with its eye rolls, hormones, and glimmers of independence. Her daughter is the archetypal overachiever, choir, orchestra, honor society, and a brand-new run for treasurer. Her son is the opposite. Twice exceptional, they call it. High IQ stamped with the gifted-and-talented label, but equally diagnosed with severe ADHD. The combination makes for brilliance that resists structure. Homework forgotten, binders exploding, deadlines slipping through his fingers. Danielle's husband works odd hours on swing shifts that often leave her the default parent.

What looks like chaos to the outside world, Danielle reframes as balance. "We knew raising mixed kids in this world meant they better be really sure of themselves," she says. Confidence was never optional. It was armor.

The breaking point

When it comes to her son, third grade really cracked things open. Executive functioning skills were suddenly expected. Binders with rings to close, homework to file, friendships that depended on more than charm. Instead, there were constant meltdowns. Pages fell loose, desks turned messy, friends drifted. His teachers taped off a square around his desk to keep him contained. The hardest part wasn't the clutter. It was the language. Danielle vividly remembers the day her son came home and told her "I'm just a bad kid." Danielle and her husband had to figure out how

to help him put that armor back on. Psychologists. Psychiatrists. Endless questions. The diagnosis was severe ADHD. Medication became the lifeline. “It was night and day,” she says. School settled. Home exhaled. Years later, now in high school, he navigates without meds, piecing together tools that stick. But the family still carries the vocabulary of that season: resilience, adjustment, faith over fear.

The daughter they never expected

Her daughter’s story begins differently. Danielle had an IUD at the time. Pregnancy wasn’t part of the plan. Yet she felt something was physically off. Doctors suspected inflammation, maybe infection. Then the pregnancy test came back positive.

Getting pregnant on an IUD is rare. Often it means a tubal pregnancy that must be terminated. Either way, it’s high risk. Danielle was told to get an ultrasound immediately. The results didn’t offer clarity, only more danger. The pregnancy wasn’t tubal, it was viable, but it was far from simple or normal. Remove the IUD and the odds of losing the baby were fifty-fifty. Leave it in, and the odds were still fifty-fifty. Numbers matter to Danielle. She runs a frac-

tional CFO firm. Risk is supposed to be measurable. This wasn’t. “At some point, I had to choose faith over fear,” she says.

They tried to remove the IUD but it stayed lodged in place, creating even more risk. Bed rest became her new normal, three months of confinement for a woman wired for work. Meals, bathroom, then back down. Type A turned captive. She found new ways to fill the hours, but the core remained the same: wait, and believe. The delivery was cinematic. No IV, no epidural. The doctor sprinted, fell, and nearly missed it entirely. “She’s always been a fighter, always in a rush to be seen,” Danielle says. Thirteen years later, the description still fits.

The mother and the businesswoman

That takes us to today, well almost. Danielle started her firm during COVID. Not because of her son, not entirely, but it was because she wanted to be there for her family and the timing mattered. The middle school years demanded advocacy, daily calls with teachers, constant presence. A traditional corporate ladder would have collapsed under that weight.

Her company became an extension of her parenting philosophy: ambition with flexibility. “We hire amazing people who are really good at what they do, but they don’t have to do it sixty hours a week,” she says. “We shouldn’t have to choose between careers and kids.”

The values travel both ways. From parenting to business, and back again. Patience in the office, resilience at home. Lessons passed down through experience, not theory.

Resilience, reframed

Resilience is the word that lingers. Parenting a neurodivergent child. Navigating a high-risk pregnancy. Building a business during a pandemic. Each moment reinforced the same truth: it feels hard because it is hard. But we can do hard things.

Danielle repeats the mantra often. Sometimes to her children. Sometimes to herself. Always as reminder that difficulty isn’t failure, it’s proof of growth.



*We knew raising mixed kids in
this world meant they better
be really sure of themselves.
Confidence was never optional.
It was armor.*



Life, loss, and the leap forward



Beth Carter

When Beth Carter speaks about her mother, there's a stillness in her voice that carries both ache and gratitude. The loss came too soon. Her mom was only in her early sixties, diagnosed at stage four with little time to prepare. Beth remembers sitting by her side in hospice, watching the decline, holding her hand, and realizing in real time that life would never again be the same.

"It was more about when she was in hospice that I had that life-is-short aha moment," Beth recalls. The stillness of those days, the dimmed light of hospital corridors, the soft rhythm of machines, became a mirror she could not look away from. And in that mirror, a question she hadn't let herself ask, "Why am I subjecting myself to a life that doesn't feel like mine?"

The moment everything shifted

At the time, Beth was still employed at a company where her absence sparked frustration. "That was really hurtful to me because I knew how much energy and time and love that I put into that company. And so to feel like they couldn't give me grace for the end of

my mom's life was... really hurtful."

The mismatch between her devotion and their lack of compassion became impossible to ignore. She had been

loyal, tireless, deeply invested. Yet as she watched her mother's time slipping away, the contrast sharpened: she was giving herself to a system that would never give back. "I remember thinking: this isn't right. I don't know what else is out there, but this can't be it."

leaving without a map

Beth had no blueprint for entrepreneurship. "I didn't know anything about entrepreneurship at that point. I didn't have friends who had gone out on their own. I had no idea," she admits. What she did have were a couple of side clients and a vision of freedom.

"I thought, if I get more than just a couple clients, I can be an outsourced bookkeeper. Awesome. I can pick my own schedule. I can not be working to the bone. And I can take time when I need it."

She smiles at the memory now—so naïve, so bold. Entrepreneurship, of course, turned out to be far more complicated. But that naïve clarity was a lifeline: there had to be a different way to live and work.

What she didn't say

Beth never told her mom she was leaving her job. "I didn't want her leaving this world worried about me and my daughter and would we make it? Even though in reality, looking back, she would have known I'd make it work."

It is one of her few regrets, that her mom never got to see what came next. The business. The seven-figure success. The life built on the ashes of grief.

"I cannot even imagine if she could see what I have built now. God, I would give anything for her to see that."

And yet, Beth can hear her voice still. "She would be excited," Beth says softly. "But at the same time, not surprised."

A mother's echo

Her mom had always been her loudest champion. "She was absolutely my biggest cheerleader. She saw that rebellion in me from day one and encouraged it so hard. She wanted me to be me," Beth remembers.

Her mom had been a rebel as a young woman, then somehow slipped into the opposite, conforming, sacrificing.

It was why she fought so hard for Beth to hold onto her

spark. "She wanted me to play to my own beat, even while she wished for me to have stability. She wanted me to have the life she didn't."

That encouragement is stitched into Beth's DNA. Every

bold move she's made, every leap she's taken, carries her mom's fingerprints.

Building differently

From those painful hospital days grew a radical clarity about the kind of workplace Beth wanted to create. "If you are sick, literally do not even think about calling me and doing the fake cough thing. Just put it in our calendar. If you need to go take a nap in the middle of the day, do it. I don't need to know," she insists.

She remembers her own corporate years vividly: the panic of calling in sick, the guilt of doctor's appointments for her daughter with special needs, the shame of being human in a system that expected perfection. "I built the company that I myself would have wanted to work for. Life is short and your family comes first. If you need to take your child to a doctor's appointment, you shouldn't have a job that makes that not okay."

Employees sometimes struggle to believe her at first. "I'll

"Life is short means not waiting for retirement to book the trip, buy the thing, or build the pool. It means saying yes now, because tomorrow is never guaranteed."

hire new employees in their fifties who are clearly adults, and they'll over-explain. 'I have to go to the pharmacy right now because...' And I'm like, okay. You don't need to explain. Just go."

The freedom shocks them. And that's exactly the point.

Life outside the office

Her philosophy doesn't end at work. With her husband, "the love of my life unicorn", Beth balances responsibility with indulgence. They talk about investments, savings, retirement. And then they talk about joy.

"Should we be putting that money into retirement? Probably. But if we wait until our retirement egg is full, who knows how long that will take? Why are we not going to enjoy it right now?"

So they play blackjack. They dream of an indoor pool, a game room, a library. "It's not necessary. But it's what we want."

The balance is everything: responsible, but never waiting too long to live.

Grief, fully felt

Beth does not romanticize her grief. "It was the most painful thing I've ever experienced." She lost not only her mom but, around the same time, another best friend to cystic fibrosis. Loss after loss, stacked too young.

One of the most impactful things, she says, was taking time off to grieve. "If I was still working for somebody else, I would not have been able to do that." She let herself feel it fully, not stuff it down. Because grief ignored only festers. And in the quiet of those days, she learned to look for the silver lining. "It feels awful to say that there's a silver

lining. But there's such a huge difference between being able to look back and see it and happiness that something happened. I am thankful that I have that ability now."

What life is short really means

The mantra that began in hospice has become the spine of her life. It shows up in how she leads her team. In how she spends her weekends. In how she parents her daughter, Brooke.

"It's taught me to look for the silver lining in bad situations," Beth explains. A client firing you, a key employee quitting, now she sees it differently. Maybe that client wasn't aligned. Maybe that employee was holding the team back. "There's always something forward waiting to come out of it."

And in her personal life, "life is short" means not waiting for retirement to book the trip, buy the thing, or build the pool. It means saying yes now, because tomorrow is never guaranteed.

The echo that remains

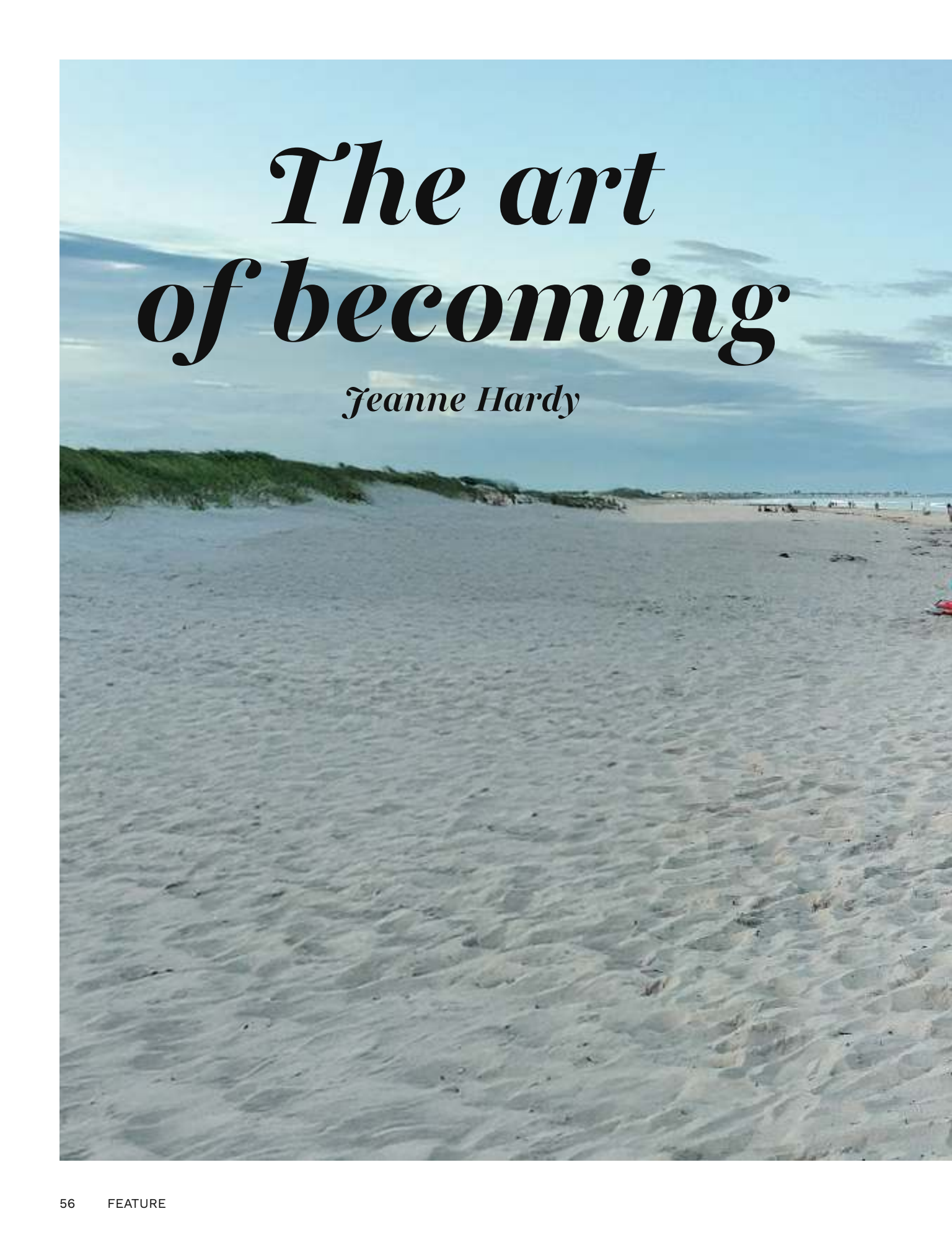
Beth sometimes imagines the conversation she would have with her mom now. The woman who cheered her rebellion, who believed in her before she believed in herself.

"She would just say, well of course you built a seven-figure business. Of course you're successful. Of course you kept taking care of Brooke. She would be excited... but not surprised."

And so Beth keeps building. Keeps leading. Keeps living. Carrying forward the echo of her mother's voice, the urgency of loss, and the fierce insistence that life is short, too short to wait, too short to settle, too short not to live.





A wide-angle photograph of a sandy beach. In the foreground, the sand is light-colored with some darker patches and footprints. To the left, there is a small dune covered in green grass. In the background, the beach stretches out towards the ocean under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. A few people can be seen in the distance near the water's edge.

The art of becoming

Jeanne Hardy



When Jeanne Hardy moved from Chicago to New York in the mid-90s, she carried little more than a portfolio, a sold-out show's worth of confidence, and three thousand dollars from the sale of her car. The rest was instinct. She was chasing an MFA, yes, but more than that, she was chasing the electricity of New York, a city that can terrify you and transform you in the same breath.

Beginnings in Chicago

Before New York, there was Chicago: late nights in small clubs where bands like Ministry would slip in to test new tracks, a city where music collided with art and anything felt possible. Hardy was part of that world, young, restless, always searching. "It was a time when everything was accessible, art, music, dance was happening everywhere," she remembers. "It was a great time for art and artists."

Her undergrad years at the Art Institute of Chicago gave her drive, community, and a taste of what was next. But the pull of New York was constant. "I always wanted to move to New York, really since high school. I just had to get there no matter what."

The leap

Graduate school became her doorway. "I didn't know anything about entrepreneurship at that point. I didn't have friends who had gone out on their own. I had no idea," Hardy says. But she knew she had to keep going. The sign came in the form of her first solo show: nearly ten works, four of them monumental nine-foot figure drawings. "I sold every piece in that show. It just blew my mind. That was my sign from the universe that I had to say yes and go."

So she did. Car sold, portfolio packed, MFA program secured. "I was really nervous because I only had three hundred dollars to my name," she laughs. But she went anyway.

Courage in the city

Landing in New York was its own art form. "It was so huge, even compared to Chicago. Every day was an adventure. Getting lost, coming up from the subway and not knowing where I was," Hardy says. She learned to treat courage as a practice, the same way she treated studio time.

Graduate school introduced her to peers already showing in New York galleries, artists navigating a scene that was

suddenly flush with money, speculation, and celebrity. Hardy found herself managing artist studios, first as a side job, then as something more. "That's when my interest really shifted to management, particularly the accounting and business management aspects," she explains.

When art became business

The late 90s and early 2000s saw the art world enter uncharted territory. "There was a lot of money pouring into the art world. It became very speculative. People were starting to collect work and then flip it the next month. Artists were like celebrities. That wasn't at all what the art world was before," Hardy recalls.

With fame came frenzy, and panic. Artists who had once scraped by were suddenly navigating million-dollar sales, ballooning taxes, and production budgets for shows in London and beyond. Some collapsed under the weight of it. "It became really important to have someone who could be your business manager," Hardy says. "I just fell in love with it all. There was so much to learn, it was challenging but it



"With business owners, I try to get them to listen to their business. The business is talking to you. What is the story it's trying to tell you right now?"



was also really exciting.”

What started as studio management became something larger. She built her own company, Creative Business Inc, to support artists, architects, and designers not just creatively, but financially. “I built it out of what I was already doing. The schedule was flexible so it let me still make my own work. And it was gratifying, helping artists keep their focus where it belonged, on the work.”

Weathering the crash

By 2008, Hardy’s client roster included not just artists but luxury designers, jewelers, textile innovators, architects. Then came the financial crisis. “The artists actually fared fine,” she notes. “But the luxury businesses didn’t. The money dried up.”

She spent months winding down companies, helping clients close gracefully, and rethinking her own business model. Diversification became her mantra. “Niching down is one thing. But you also have to look at the complementary industries around your niche. That’s how you survive.”

Collecting and creating

Though she no longer pursues a career as an artist, Hardy never stopped creating. She also became a passionate collector. “I like to support younger artists by buying their work,” she says. Over the years she’s built a personal collection that feels both eclectic and intimate. Her most treasured pieces? Gifts from artists she’s worked with for decades. “One of them is an abstract painting, really colorful. It reminds me of city neon lights reflecting on wet streets. It’s my prized possession.”

What art teaches

Her reverence for artists runs deep. “Artists are also entrepreneurs,” Hardy says. “The truly great ones listen to the work. The work tells them what to do. For them that’s the source of truth they follow.”

She applies the same philosophy to business. “With business owners, I try to get them to listen to their business. Look at the numbers, the metrics, the KPIs. The business is talking to you. What is the story it’s trying to tell you right now? Just based on that, what are your next best steps?”

For Hardy, the connection between creativity and commerce is less a contradiction than harmony. Both require trust, trusting the process, the practice, and the truth in front of you.

The roots of creativity

Her love of art began at home. “My mom was an amazing artist. She was a schoolteacher, but she could draw anything, and she was constantly making things. My grandmother was the same way,” Hardy remembers. Holidays were handmade, childhood was filled with color and craft. “I never stopped. That’s just what we did.”

If there’s a final note to Hardy’s story, it’s a refusal to settle for certainty. “You don’t always have to know where you’re going,” she insists. “If you can just follow your interests, you’re going to end up in a pretty nice place. Even if people are disappointed in you because you’re not doing the other thing, stay the course. You can create a company out of anything. You can create a life out of that.”



The weight of belonging

Questian Telka

When Questian Telka welcomed her second son into the world, she expected the ordinary chaos of new motherhood: sleepless nights, tiny fingers curled against her chest, the blurred days of caring for a newborn. Instead, she woke to a nightmare she could never have prepared for.

Her baby arrived by C-section, his tiny body purple, his breath uncertain. Doctors rushed him away before she could hold him. "I didn't even see him for hours," she recalls. "I don't think I held him for almost a week."

Within days, the diagnosis began to take shape: Apert syndrome, a rare condition that affects roughly one in 150,000 births. The sutures of his skull were fused. His fingers and toes webbed together. Feeding was nearly impossible with a cleft palate. A malrotated bowel required emergency surgery just one week into his life.

The six weeks that followed were a blur of monitors, IV poles, and the kind of fear that makes time collapse. "It felt like I came out of my body," she says. "Like I was floating above myself, watching this all unfold. I was in shock." That shock never fully receded, it reshaped her life.

A childhood of surgeries

By the age of two, her son had already endured most of his

ten surgeries. There would be cranial procedures to allow his skull to expand, operations to separate his fingers, treatments to repair his palate. Feeding was a battle. Breathing was precarious.

Then came another crisis. At age six, after a complication from that early bowel surgery, he developed a life-threatening obstruction. The month-long hospitalization that followed pushed his tiny body to its limit. "He was septic. He was so sick. He was hooked up to every machine you could think of," Questian says quietly.

Twice, she nearly lost him. Twice, she didn't.

Her gratitude is still edged with disbelief. "I can't believe what he's been through," she says. "He's remarkable."

The ripples of one life

Raising a child with a rare condition does not stay neatly in the box labeled "home." It ripples outward, into work, into friendships, into identity. For Questian, it reshaped everything.

Before his birth, she hadn't thought deeply about disability or inclusion. Afterward, she couldn't stop. "I didn't realize how many families were living this reality," she explains. "How many kids had disabilities. How often they were ignored or sidelined. Once you see it, you can't unsee it."

Her business choices reflect that awakening. She built a firm that prioritizes boundaries, flexibility, and inclusion. She became involved with nonprofits focused on vocational opportunities for people of all abilities, helping teenagers transition into adulthood with dignity and work that fits.

The personal became political. Her son's story gave her clarity about the spaces she wanted to create, not just for him but for anyone who has ever felt shut out.

DEI as a calling

In an era when diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can sound like corporate jargon, Questian speaks about it with lived urgency. "Everybody wants a sense of belonging," she says. "In the workplace. In school. In life. That's universal." Representation, she argues, isn't optional. It's survival.

When employees see leaders who look like them, clients who share their experiences, or colleagues who understand their struggles, it shifts what feels possible. "Belong-

ing is often the number one reason people choose a job," she notes. "More than salary. They want to feel seen."

Her son's education has made the point even sharper. Inclusion, she insists, benefits everyone. "We want him in an inclusive learning environment as much as possible with his peers. It's not just helpful for him, it's helpful for other kids, too. Everybody grows when everybody belongs."

Feminism in practice

Long before her son's diagnosis, Questian considered herself a feminist. "I was born a feminist," she says with a wry smile. "I've always been a girl's girl, someone who wanted to elevate women and fight for them."

Motherhood, particularly motherhood of a child with a disability, fused that feminism with action. It gave her urgency, direction, and a willingness to use her platforms for others. That's what inspired the She Counts podcast she co-created, a project designed to amplify voices too often ignored in business and beyond.

"I want to fight for everybody who doesn't have the same privileges I have," she says. "We have to make sure everyone has a voice and a seat at the table."

The price of courage

None of this came easily. Boundaries became survival

tools. "I learned to manage my energy, my stress," she explains. "Stress is one of the biggest triggers for flare-ups, for me, for him. I had to learn when to say no."

She admits the early years drained her dry. "I've almost cried it all out," she says. "Now, when I tell the story, I sound logical. But the truth is, it was the hardest season of my life."

A slow parade

Her son, now seven, greets each school day like a festival. As their car pulls up to the drop-off line, he rolls down the window and waves to every teacher, every aide, every student within sight. His greetings ripple outward, turning the carpool line into a makeshift parade.

"It makes their day," Questian says. "And it makes mine."

It is the small rituals, the parade, the way his classmates adapt, the shared laughter that remind her why belong-

ing matters so much. It's not theory. It's lived truth.

Looking ahead

What does the future hold for her son? It's a question

that keeps her moving. She wants workplaces that will see his abilities before his diagnosis. She wants a society that makes space for difference, not as charity but as strength. The good news: the accommodations that make work possible for someone with a disability often benefit everyone. Flexible schedules, better communication, accessible spaces, all ripple outward, just as her son's presence has rippled outward into her life.

"He's just like any other little boy," she says. "He loves garage doors and buses. He dreams. He wants to belong."

The courage to belong

Questian's story is not tidy. It is messy, painful, and deeply human. It is also a study in how personal crisis becomes collective responsibility. Her son's survival forced her to rebuild. His joy demanded she reimagine. His difference taught her the urgency of inclusion.

If there is a throughline, it is courage, the courage to face machines and monitors, to sit in hospital corridors, to rebuild a business with boundaries, to create platforms for voices beyond her own.

"We have to keep moving the cart forward," she insists. "For our kids. For all of us."

Her son's parade each morning is proof that it's working. Proof that belonging can be built, one wave at a time.

"I've almost cried it all out. Now, when I tell the story, I sound logical. But the truth is, it was the hardest season of my life."





Megan Leesley

The river *knows the way*

There are moments in a life when the ground gives out beneath you. For Megan Leesley, those moments came twice: once in the slow erosion of an abusive marriage, and again in the sudden, brutal silence of suicide.

What astonishes is not that she survived, but how she rebuilt, how she re-stitched her days into something not merely livable, but radiant. She is a woman who has walked through fire, who has felt the river drag her under, and who chose, against every pull of despair, to rise.

A house divided

The unraveling began in shadows that only later revealed themselves as patterns. She was a CPA working seventy-plus hours a week, carrying the weight of her family while her partner drifted deeper into alcohol and rage. Nights ended with her belongings hurled down the stairs, accusations spat across the dark. Mornings brought denial, "I never said that. I never did that."

It is the cruel rhythm of gaslighting: to suffer and then to question the fact of your suffering. "I thought I was insane," Megan recalls. "I thought I was crazy."

The phone call

And then came the call.

She was in Salida, Colorado, where the mountains fold into hot springs and the air is sharp with pine. It was two days after Christmas. She had just seen her daughter's biological father, a kind man, not abusive, never cruel. They had married too young, parted amicably, co-parented with love. The day before, he had kissed his daughter goodbye. Now Megan stood in a Walmart dressing room, swimsuit in hand, when her phone rang. His mother's voice on the other end: frantic, broken. He was gone.

Confusion. Rage. A body gone cold. She stuffed clothes into a bag, bundled her daughter into the car, and drove north on a 3-hour trip that felt endless.

At the house, the questions from his parents came sharp and cruel. "Did you have a key?" "Where were you?" Accusations floated in the air like ash. But the police had already ruled it a suicide. The truth was immovable. Her daughter was nine, two months from ten. Megan called school counselors, friends, and anyone who could tell her what words to use. In the end, she walked into a back bedroom with her child, said the most unbearable

words of her life: Your dad has taken his own life.

And then, mercifully, the friends in the living room closed the gap, arms around them both, music filling the silence. A song on guitar: Lyle Lovett's If I Needed You. Even now, it is enough to break her open.

The eagle

Grief rearranges the soul. For weeks, Megan could barely rise from bed. She had once believed suicide was selfish. But when it arrived at her doorstep, her certainty dissolved. "It changed so much for me," she says. "It wasn't, how could you do this to us? It was, my God, how much must you have been hurting to take this step?"

And then came a dream. He was there, telling her, I'm okay. I'm at peace. You can let go. She woke with the weight of guilt lifted.

At his funeral, as his casket sank into the earth, a bald eagle flew from a crab apple tree no taller than twelve feet. He had always said that if he could come back as anything in another life, he would want to come back as an eagle. For weeks afterward, she and her daughter saw eagles everywhere, in fields, trees, and telephone poles. "It felt like he was still with us," she says. "Still watching."

Years later, at her own lowest point, driving, wondering if she could endure another day, she looked up. An eagle perched in a tree met her gaze. She kept going.

The weight of leaving

Meanwhile, the cycle of abuse deepened and darkened. Her daughter, in high school at this point, learned to stop defending her. Speaking up only made the punishments worse. The violence had always been Megan's burden to carry, but the day her daughter asked, timidly, "Don't you

think you're drinking too much?" was met with fury, and something shifted.

Twelve years together had carved grooves of dependence so deep that leaving felt like free fall.

Isolation is the abuser's most effective weapon. Friends had slipped away. Family felt far. "I truly felt like if I didn't have him, I didn't have anything," Megan says. "Who would ever love me?"

"Who would want me?"

It is easy, from a safe distance, to wonder why someone stays. It is harder and braver to listen to the chorus of

*"The river taught me:
to fight the current is
to drown. To trust it
is to move forward."*

self-doubt that becomes the only voice you hear. Leaving required not only courage but a rewriting of the very story she told herself about who she was and what she deserved.

The river as teacher

Healing did not come in neat stages. It came in currents. Living in Salida, she found the Arkansas River. At first, she paddled its edges, learning to read the whitewater, the lines between danger and safe passage. Then she rafted, then kayaked, then carried her life into its canyons for weeks at a time.

The Grand Canyon changed her. Fifteen days on the river with no phone, no clock, only the rise of sun and fall of night, only a team bound by survival. “Your focus is just what’s right in front of you,” Megan says. “Not the past, not the future. Just the river.”

There is no better metaphor. The river cannot be controlled; it can only be respected, worked with, surrendered to. To fight it is to drown. To trust it is to move forward.

Life rebuilt

Today, Megan is engaged to the love of her life, thriving in her career, and her daughter is grown and flourishing. She has built not only stability but joy. “I look back and I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for all those things,” she says.



“The resiliency, the pivoting, the reminder that life is now. Experience it now.”

Her voice is calm now, her presence steady. Her daughter calls in panic, and she answers with perspective. No longer reactive, no longer ruled by fear. “Younger me would be proud,” she admits. “Proud of how calm I am, of how I can see the bigger picture.”

She knows now that healing is not a contest. Pain cannot be measured against someone else’s. Abuse, grief, loss, all are real, all deserve to be honored.

Grace of resilience

To tell Megan’s story is not to romanticize suffering. It is to witness the truth: that there is life after the unimaginable. That even in the darkest hours, there are signs, an eagle, a song, a river, that remind us of the possibility of light. Her journey is not neat. It is jagged, water-worn, resilient. But it is hers. And it offers, to anyone listening, a quiet insistence:

*We can rebuild.
We can rise.
We can live fully, now.*



Reset rituals

Five-minute pauses that change everything.

Life rarely gives us long, uninterrupted hours for rest, but it does offer moments. The art of the reset is learning how to stretch five minutes into something that feels expansive. These quick rituals bring calm, clarity, and a touch of beauty into busy days.

The tea ritual:

Step Away from the Screen. Boil water slowly. Watch the steam rise. Let your tea steep without rushing. Notice the scent before you sip. This is less about the drink, more about reclaiming presence.

Desk stretch & posture reset:

Sit tall, roll your shoulders back, interlace your fingers overhead, and breathe deeply. Hold for three breaths. Release. Repeat. Your spine (and mood) will thank you.

Breathwork break:

Try the 4-7-8 method: inhale for 4 counts, hold for 7, exhale for 8. Repeat three times. In less than a minute, your nervous system begins to calm.

Sensory swap:

Change your environment with intention. Light a candle with a scent tied to memory. Play a favorite song. Mist your space with eucalyptus or lavender. A sensory shift can reset your entire perspective.

The pause list:

Keep a small notebook nearby. Jot down one thing you're grateful for or a fleeting thought you want to remember. Writing slows the mind and creates space.

Remember:

The ritual itself is simple. What matters is giving yourself permission to pause.



Aitza Negron

Breaking the silence: One woman's journey through abuse, survival, and reclaiming power

“My story isn’t about the violence. It’s about the resilience that follows.”

When Aitza first met him, she was only fourteen. A high school freshman, still mapping out who she was in the world, she thought she was stepping into a teenage romance. Her cousin was dating his friend, and what started as convenience bloomed into familiarity. At that age, no one warns you what control disguised as devotion looks like. No one hands you a checklist of red flags.

At first, she told herself it was love. The way he wanted her close, the way he said she didn’t need those other friends. “At the time, I thought, okay, this is what relationships are,” she says now. “But looking back, that was the isolation beginning.”

When love turns into silence

By sixteen, things had shifted. Arguments sharpened into verbal barbs. Privacy became secrecy. And then, one day in his kitchen, words

turned into physical violence. “I was in shock,” she remembers. “I thought, what is going on? But then came the apologies, the promises, the stories that it was my fault, that I had made him lose control.”

It’s a script familiar to anyone who has endured domestic violence. The pattern of blame, apology, and reconciliation is engineered to trap. The cycle kept her tethered for years, through late high school and into her freshman year of college. “He was good for two years,” she told herself. “So it must have been me that caused the change.”

The parade

The breaking point didn’t come in private. It came in New York City, during the Puerto Rican Day Parade: the summer right before starting her freshman year in college. In a crowd, surrounded by his friends and hers, he hurt her, pinching, pulling, asserting dominance in plain sight.

“That was the first time it happened in public,” she says. “And when the NYPD shoved me aside and threw him against a wall, I think that’s when I realized this is going to get bad. It’s now like happening in public. I think that was like my wake up call.” Still, leaving took time. As research shows, it takes most survivors seven attempts before they leave for good. Aitza was no exception. “I stuck around for a few more months after that,” she admits. “I tried to cool things down, but the closer my college start date got, the worse his behavior became. I went to college in the fall on a full scholarship, and found out he had cheated and got another woman pregnant about a month after. She knew about me and knew what kind of person he was, but made her choice. It reinforced what I’d started to realize that day in New York, this just keeps happening, drawing more people into the cycle. I had oppor-



tunities ahead of me, and I realized I needed to take them before I got pulled in any deeper.

Rebuilding the self

Walking away didn't mean instant freedom. Abuse lingers in the body long after the relationship ends. Loud voices, sudden movements, even kindness can feel like triggers. "It took me six years to really feel safe again," she says. "And longer than that to stop seeing red flags everywhere." Therapy helped. Speaking at a domestic violence event during college cracked open the silence. Using her platform as a money coach to talk about financial abuse gave her a way to reclaim control. And connecting with other survivors taught her she wasn't alone.

"I used to feel so much shame," she admits. "I'm a strong-willed person. How could I let this happen to me? But abuse is psychological long before it's physical. It's not about weakness, it's about manipulation. Once you understand that, you start to forgive yourself."

The long shadow

Even years later, remnants of trauma echo. In early relationships, she kept walls high. "I was harsher with men than with friends," she says. "One mistake, and you were done. It was my way of protecting myself." But over time, and with faith, she softened. "My relationship with God has deepened over the last two years," she says. "It's helped me heal the inside. It gave me clarity." She even met with her abuser once, in a public park, to reclaim her voice. "I wouldn't recommend it for everyone, when I look back, I realize how dangerous that was," she says carefully. "But for me

in that moment, it was a way of taking back my power. I told him: you have a daughter now. Pray she never goes through what I went through."

Her instinct about the danger was sound. While the immediate aftermath of leaving an abusive relationship is statistically the most perilous time for survivors, experts warn that the threat can persist for years. Many abusers view any contact, even years later, as an opportunity to reassert control or retaliate.

Breaking stigma

Perhaps the most dangerous myth is that abuse is rare. In reality, it's everywhere, in neighborhoods, boardrooms, even in the lives of women we admire. Aitza remembers interviewing at a Big Four accounting firm, and when asked about her sorority involvement, she mentioned their mission: raising awareness of violence against women. She worried that bringing up such a personal topic during a professional interview would cost her the job. Instead, the partner across the table confided she too had survived.

"You would never imagine," Aitza reflects. "A partner at a firm, a woman so accomplished, had gone through this. But that's how common it is."

Her message now

Today, Aitza is thriving. She moved from Connecticut to Miami, built her own business, and uses her voice to raise awareness, particularly about financial abuse, a form often overlooked. She teaches women how to protect themselves, build secret savings, and craft exit strategies. Asked what she would say to her younger self, she doesn't hesitate. "Trust your gut. If it doesn't feel right,

it isn't. Don't isolate yourself. Tell your friends. Tell somebody. You don't need to save your abuser. Save yourself."

And to anyone still caught in the cycle: "Start to build your network. Make a plan. Cut ties when you can. It's dangerous when you leave, but it's also the first step to freedom. And please, go to therapy. You deserve to heal."

The other side

When Aitza looks back at the girl she was, isolated, ashamed, convinced she was to blame, she hardly recognizes her. "At that point, I didn't even think I'd make it to college," she says. "Now, I run my own business. I help people. I live in Miami. My life is full."

Her story isn't about the violence. It's about the resilience that follows. "Whatever dark place you're in, know that five years, seven years, even one year down the road, you can be somewhere completely different," she says. The lesson is clear: survival is not just about escaping. It's about reclaiming power, rewriting the story, and reminding others, especially the ones still trapped, that freedom is possible.

October matters

This story arrives in October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month. It's a reminder that while breast cancer awareness fills billboards and fundraisers (as it should), another epidemic lives in silence behind closed doors. Survivors need just as much visibility, just as much support. If you or someone you love is experiencing domestic violence, please know: you are not alone. Call the **National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233 or text "START" to 88788**. For confidential online chat, visit thehotline.org. If you are in immediate danger, dial 911.

Fall recipes to gather around

Autumn is a season of warmth; roasted flavors, rich textures, and slow moments at the table. These recipes are made for sharing, whether you're hosting friends or enjoying a quiet night in.

Apple & brie crostini with honey drizzle

Elegant finger food with minimal effort.

1 baguette, sliced and toasted

8 oz brie, sliced

2 apples, thinly sliced

2 tbsp honey

Fresh thyme sprigs



Directions: Layer baguette slices with brie and apple. Drizzle with honey and top with thyme. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Pairs with: A glass of spiced cider or your apple cider bourbon fizz.



Roasted butternut squash soup with sage brown butter

Golden, and deeply comforting.

1 large butternut squash, peeled and cubed

2 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, chopped

2 garlic cloves, minced

4 cups vegetable broth

½ cup heavy cream
(or coconut milk for dairy-free)

4 tbsp unsalted butter

Fresh sage leaves

Salt + pepper

Directions: Roast squash with olive oil, salt, and pepper at 400°F until tender. In a pot, sauté onion and garlic, then add squash and broth. Simmer, then blend until smooth, and stir in the cream. In a small pan, melt butter with sage until crisp. Drizzle sage brown butter over each bowl.

Pairs with: Warm sourdough and a crisp green salad.

Caramelized pear crisp

Golden, cozy, and perfect for sharing.

6 ripe pears, sliced

2 tbsp butter

¼ cup brown sugar

1 tsp cinnamon

1 cup oats

½ cup flour

½ cup brown sugar

½ cup cold butter, cubed

Directions:

Cook pears with butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon until soft. In a bowl, mix the oats, flour, sugar, and butter until the mixture is crumbly. Layer pears in a baking dish, top with crumble. Bake at 375°F for 30–35 minutes until golden.



Pairs with: Vanilla ice cream or whipped cream.

Unseen battles: How Nicole Davis turned her darkest season into a voice for mental health

There is a hush that descends when a woman admits she has contemplated her own disappearance. It is a hush made of stigma, of fear, of generations taught that strength means silence. Nicole Davis remembers that hush. She remembers when her husband, JW, leaned in and asked the question that shifted everything: Are you okay? At the time, Nicole didn't think anything was wrong. She was going through the motions, getting up, going to work, returning home to collapse into nothingness. The absence of appetite. The absence of energy. The intrusive thoughts that darkened her private hours. She believed this flatness, this fog, was simply how adulthood felt.

"I thought it was very normal," she recalls. "So normal that when I went to my first consultation with a health-care practitioner, I relayed these same feelings to her. She said, there's nothing normal about that. And that was a light bulb moment. That's when I realized, I needed help."

The slow descent

Nicole is clear: she did not grow up under the shadow of depression. Her childhood was joyful, animated

by her early entrepreneurial spirit. "I've had businesses since I was three years old," she laughs. The storm arrived later, after college, when the convergence of life transitions came crashing at once.

She was only 22 when she married, took on the responsibility of raising two children who moved in with them immediately, started her first post-college job in a new state without family nearby, and enrolled in graduate school.

"It was a huge adjustment," she says. "All of it together, instant family, new job, new state, grad school, I think that just triggered the depression." At first, she did what so many high-achieving women do: she kept going. She pushed herself into a daily routine, convinced she could outpace the heaviness. But over time, her body began to tell the story she could not voice.

"I've always been thin, but I was at the point where I barely weighed 75, 76 pounds," Nicole remembers. "I didn't want to eat. My nurse practitioner told me I was slowly starving myself to death."

There were whispers of anorexia in her medical chart, though Nicole never sought thinness. "I didn't want

to be skinny," she says firmly. "I'm a Black woman. I want curves! But the symptoms lined up. I wasn't trying to shrink my body, but depression had taken my appetite with it."

The turning point

What saved Nicole's life was a combination of love and intervention. "It was definitely my husband," she says. "He gave me the push to seek the help I needed. And my parents, too, they were like, Take some time off work. Get better. Get healthy."

Nicole did. She moved back home to Georgia, took medical leave, and entered outpatient treatment. There, in the group therapy rooms where strangers became lifelines, she learned the tools she still carries today.

"They taught us how to kick negative thoughts out of gear," she explains. "Not letting them run the show. Having a community, people who notice when you're not okay. Eating healthy. Exercising. And my faith, leaning into something bigger than myself. Those things saved me."

She also started medication. "There's this misconception that you can just snap out of it. I wish it were that easy. Sometimes you need meds to help

Nicole Davis

*“Depression is not weakness. It is not failure.
It is real, treatable, survivable.”*





*"It's okay to not be okay.
And even more, it's okay
to ask for help."*

kick your mind back into a positive space while you learn how to cope. That was true for me.”

Stigma and silence

For Nicole, one of the greatest hurdles was not the depression itself but the shame surrounding it.

“I was hesitant to share because I thought people would look at me differently. That they’d think I was weak,” she admits. “But everyone I’ve told has been supportive. No one has made me feel less than. The stigma is in our heads, but it’s also in our culture. For too long, mental health has been whispered about, never spoken out loud.”

Nicole’s first public step into that radical strength came onstage at a keynote.

“Yes, that was my first time sharing with such a large group,” she says.

“And afterwards, people came up to me, so many people, saying thank you, saying it gave them courage to share their own stories. Some even told me it pushed them to seek help they knew they needed.”

She pauses, her voice catching.

“That’s what makes it worth it. If my openness helps someone else, I’ll keep talking. I’m an open book.”

Her candor is reshaping her industry. In accounting, a field where precision and perfection are prized, vulnerability is often buried. Nicole is helping to excavate it. “We carry so much stress,” she explains. “We’re holding people’s financial futures in our hands. And yet we don’t talk about the toll that takes. Sharing my story allowed my peers to say, Yes, I’m doing well here, but I’m struggling there. That honesty matters.”

Reframing the narrative

Nicole is part of a cultural shift.

Younger generations are demanding workplaces where mental health is prioritized, where therapy is normalized, where leadership models vulnerability rather than masks it.

For Nicole, that begins with benefits.

“Companies need to make mental health care accessible and free,” she says. “If you come to work depressed, you’re not going to be productive. Offering therapy, offering time off, making it part of the culture, that’s how we create workplaces where people thrive.”

But it’s not only about policy. It’s about permission. “If it comes from the top, if leaders say, I don’t have great days every day, it gives everyone else permission to seek help too. That’s powerful.”

The rituals of resilience

Today, Nicole has built an arsenal of daily practices that tether her to light when shadows return.

“I’m big on affirmations. What you think, you are. I pray. I rest. If I feel myself going dark, I’ll literally take a nap to let my brain reset. I cook; it’s methodical, calming. I exercise. I lift weights, I feed myself brain foods instead of junk. And I’m still open to medication if I need it. Sometimes you just need that kickstart.”

She’s learned to notice triggers, to respond rather than spiral. “Being self-aware is everything. And having relationships with people who value you, who act as a safety net, that makes you stronger. You’re not alone.”

A legacy of openness

Nicole’s advocacy continues beyond the keynote stage. On social media,

she shares both triumphs and struggles. “I don’t want people to think it’s all rainbows and jelly beans,” she laughs. “There are good days, bad days, very bad days. Some days I take the whole day off. And I share that, because it’s real.”

She also offers resources to anyone who reaches out. “If someone heard me speak and needs support, I’ll point them to the right place. We need to normalize asking for help.”

Her advice to those quietly struggling? Start small.

“Call your state’s crisis hotline. Talk to someone you trust. You don’t have to tell the full story, just say, I’m having a hard day. Use the last little bit of energy you have to reach out. That’s the hardest part, but it’s also the first step toward healing.”

Why her story matters now

More than 21 million adults in the U.S. experience at least one major depressive episode in their lives. In accounting, Nicole’s own field, the profession ranks near the top for mental-health crises. And yet, stigma still keeps too many silent.

“I just think the more we talk about it, the more it will help others,” she says simply.

Our parents and grandparents whispered about mental illness. Nicole and her peers are speaking it out loud.

And in the space between whispers and speech, healing begins.

Depression is not weakness. It is not failure. It is a common and serious mental disorder: real, treatable, survivable. Nicole Davis is living proof. And in telling her story, she reminds us of something vital: It’s okay to not be okay. And even more, it’s okay to ask for help.



Twyla Verhelst

“I was scared, but I did it anyway”

The auditorium smelled faintly of roses, bouquets clutched by nervous hands and proud parents. When Quintana walked across the stage in her cap and gown last June, the applause sounded no different than for any other graduate. But for her mother, Twyla Verhelst, the moment was layered with eighteen years of waiting, wondering, and small, hard-won breakthroughs. “She walked across the stage like every other graduate that day,” Twyla recalls, her voice catching.

When motherhood rewrites itself

Parenthood arrives with its own mythology, images of first steps, first words, perfectly timed milestones. For Twyla, those expectations shifted around her daughter’s first birthday. Quintana wasn’t crawling, wasn’t imitating, seemed content in her own world. “At first, we thought, this is great, she’s easy to take anywhere. She’s so calm,” Twyla says. “But then we realized that bubble was actually something we should be watching.”

At 22 months, the diagnosis came: autism. Suddenly, the imagined narrative of early motherhood was gone, replaced with questions no one had prepared her to answer. “You take that really hard,” Twyla admits. “You start grieving the vision of what you thought parenting would look like.”

The practical challenges arrived as quickly as the emotional ones. Which therapists? What schools? Which foods? What habits? And in a smaller Canadian city with limited resources, the choices narrowed further. Within two years, the family uprooted themselves and returned to Calgary, chasing the resources their daughter needed.

Patience as a practice

Patience was never Twyla’s strongest trait. She laughs about it now: “My husband, my parents, they’d all say I wasn’t the most patient person.”

“Pushing her on time, telling her to hurry, to get her shoes on, to move faster, that was the surest way to trigger a meltdown,” Twyla says. “I had to learn to pause. To be okay with being late.”

The pause became more than a parenting strategy. It seeped into the way she managed her team, the way she moved through the world. Friends and colleagues began to describe her as patient. “That’s what Quintana gave me,” she says. “A kind of patience I never had before.”

The yoga connection

Long before she was a mother, Twyla practiced yoga. At first, it was a runner’s stretch, a counterbalance to miles logged on city streets. But as the practice deepened, it be-

came something else: a place where stillness was unavoidable, where the chatter of her mind had to quiet.

"In yoga, especially the faster-paced classes I loved, you couldn't plan out your grocery list in your head. You had to be present," she says.

When Quintana came along, yoga became survival. "It's not easy to watch your friends' children hit milestones while you're waiting for your therapist to arrive, waiting for the next breakthrough," Twyla admits. "Yoga gave me a way to stay grounded. It was the reminder that if I cared for myself, I could show up better for her."

Years later, Twyla would complete her 200-hour yoga teacher training, guiding students through the same hour of stillness she had once carved out for herself. "It's sacred," she says. "You know this may be the only hour they give themselves all week. I get to help make it count."

Milestones that glow brighter

When Quintana finally waved goodbye, years after her peers, the moment was unforgettable. "I dropped to the floor in tears," Twyla recalls. "It was like, she's here with us."

There were others. The day Quintana declared, after jumping from a high diving board, "I was scared, but I did it anyway." The first time she constructed a complicated sentence on her own. The everyday walks, where she notices details others miss.

"She causes us to pause," Twyla says. "Life is in the fast lane, and she slows us down. She makes us see."

Adulthood, differently defined

This summer, Quintana turned eighteen, becoming a legal adult in Canada. Instead of university brochures or dorm room shopping lists, her path now includes a specialized adult day program. From nine to three, she and her peers, some with autism, some with down syndrome, some with physical challenges, learn life skills: planning outings, cooking, exercising, and even preparing for jobs.

"She thrives with routine," Twyla says. "And this program gives her that. It gives her community."

The goal isn't a conventional résumé. It's contribution, responsibility, and the dignity of purpose. Whether that looks like a paid job or volunteer work, what matters most

"That's what Quintana gave me: a kind of patience I never had before."

to Twyla is that Quintana has a place in the world.

Parenting as surrender

Twyla often frames her parenting jour-

ney as a dismantling of control. "I thought I'd be the strict mom, the one with rules and guardrails," she says. "But that didn't work for her. I had to surrender that vision."

In yoga, surrender is often achieved in corpse pose, when the body finally releases. In motherhood, surrender was an ongoing process: to slower timelines, to unpredictable milestones, and to the reminder that no journey looks the same.

"I used to wallow, thinking my parenting journey was so different from my friends," Twyla admits. "But in hindsight? Everyone's parenting journey is different. Everyone's yoga journey is different. None of it looks the way you expect."

A mantra for us all

"I was scared, but I did it anyway," has become a family mantra. They apply as much to her mother as to her. To move cities for better care. To release impatience for patience. To trade strictness for presence. To trust in surrender.

At 18, Quintana meditates daily, sometimes for just a few minutes and sometimes for longer periods. She shows off tree pose, holds downward dog, dreams aloud of Bali, where her mother once practiced yoga among rice paddies and sunrises. One day, they'll travel there together. Until then, the lessons continue: patience, presence, pause.

The bigger picture

Twyla's story isn't just about one child, one diagnosis, one family. It's about how difference rewrites identity, how motherhood expands beyond cliché, how practices like yoga remind us to breathe when life demands more than we imagined.

Autism, once whispered about, now stands more openly in public conversation. But the work remains: to make resources accessible, to celebrate milestones no less brilliant for arriving late, to remind every parent that their journey, however different, is valid.

"Everyone's path is different," Twyla says, echoing both yoga and life. "And that's the beauty of it."



*“Everyone’s path is
different. And that’s the
beauty of it.”*

Alex Mic-Podar



**Growing up under
communism, leaving
everything
behind, and finding the
American dream**

There are some lives that don't just cross borders, they span worlds. For Alex Mic-Podar, that world began in a small Romanian village under Nicolae Ceausescu's communist rule. It took her through bread lines, butchering restrictions, and whispered neighborhood deals, and eventually, across an ocean to the United States with just \$50 in her pocket.

Today, she calls America home, a citizen who built a business and a life from scratch. But her story is less about arrival and more about reinvention, resilience, and reimagining what it means to belong.

Childhood in Romania

"I grew up under communism," Alex begins. "Families would get tickets for how much bread, milk, or meat they could have. You took the ticket to the store and only with that ticket could you get food." As the youngest in her family, Alex often stood in line for bread. Sometimes she slipped between people's legs to reach the front. Other times, neighbors would simply lift her forward, or tip her off when a fresh delivery would arrive. "It meant waking up at 3 a.m. to beat the line," she remembers. Even food from one's own animals was regulated. "If you butchered your own, you had to give fifty to seventy percent to the government. People found ways around it. Neighbors shared meat quietly, unreported." For a child, it was a strange mixture of scarcity and independence. "I never had a wristwatch, I knew when to go home by the light outside. That's why I'm obsessed with watches today. It was a very independent childhood. I had a lot of fantasy, and I think that helped me succeed later."

When the world shifted

The fall of communism in late 1989 marked a turning point. In January 1990, Alex's family moved to Hungary. She was eight years old. Tragedy struck in her early twenties when her

mother passed away, just two weeks after she returned from a religious mission. "That was a shock," she says quietly. "And I realized that most of my close friends were actually in the U.S., not Hungary."

Those friends became her lifeline. "They came together and paid for my first semester. My best friend Julie covered my first month of rent. My ex-boyfriend gave me fifty dollars for food on my layover in Amsterdam. That was all I had. Everything else was paid for by friends. So I came, by myself."

Landing with fifty dollars and a dream

If Alex expected skyscrapers and movie scenes, she doesn't say so. "I didn't really have a vision," she admits. "I was already an immigrant once.

I knew I had to work hard, and I had my friends. My only obstacles were money and English."

Utah became her first home in America, a place where her mission friends lived

and where she could enroll in school. Her days started in the dark: custodial work from four to six a.m. She learned English not from books, but by speaking every day.

The culture shock came in other forms. "In Hungary, McDonald's was a fancy restaurant. In America, there was a one-dollar menu. I gained over seventy-five pounds in my first year." She laughs at the memory, but the change was real. There were other lessons too: "I grew up believing only in hard work. In America, I learned you also have to work smart. And I learned positivity."

Becoming American, on her own terms

Alex never set out to pursue the American dream. "It wasn't why I came," she says. "But it became that."

She helped her best friend Julie open a business, supporting it even when she briefly moved back to Romania. "The business grew so much it was able to sponsor my green card. I became a citizen three years ago. That's the American dream,

"That's the American dream: coming here with \$50 in your pocket, working hard and smart, and building a life."

coming here with \$50 in your pocket, working hard and smart, and building a life.”

Returning to Romania for seven years only confirmed where she belonged. “I could never synchronize with the negativity there. In America, I never felt like an imposter. I’m driven, I love working hard, and I love when it’s appreciated.” One fight with a stranger in a grocery store, so intense it turned physical, was the final push. “That was my last nail in the coffin. I said, I’m going back. And I did.”

The philosophy of reinvention

Asked what she hopes the next generation takes from her story, Alex pauses. “Life isn’t as hard as we make it,” she says finally. “We overcomplicate it. I was a poor child in Romania who found

a way to make money at fourteen, who found a way to come to America. You can build your circumstances. But if you choose to lick your wounds, you stay stuck.”

Entrepreneurship, she insists, isn’t innate. “Anybody can do it. Don’t put yourself in a box. I was the black sheep in my family, a lost child. But I said ‘enough is enough’ and worked. That drive got me here.”

She doesn’t romanticize hardship. She still struggles with depression but approaches it with pragmatism. “I give myself three guilt-free days. Maybe I don’t get out of bed, maybe I scroll TikTok all day. But on the fourth day, I get up like nothing ever happened. We put too much pressure on ourselves. Be fair with yourself. Be honest. And then get up and go.”



Leave the notes to



ABACOR



20 episodes and counting...

Sam Hallburn & Candy Bellau

When the Unbalanced podcast launched, its premise was startling in its simplicity: two firm owners sitting down, with no script, no agenda, and no safety net, to tell the truth about what it actually means to run a business. There would be no highlight reels, no buzzwords, and no air-brushed success stories. Instead, there would be laughter, tears, confessions, regrets... because that's real life.

Now, more than 20 episodes later, Unbalanced has become something rare: a safe space in an industry that often rewards polish over vulnerability. Co-hosted by Candy Bellau and Sam Hallburn, and powered by Anchor, the show has resonated precisely because it is messy, honest, and unapologetically human.

Building a show on truth, not polish

Candy and Sam never set out to become media figures. Both run firms. Both know firsthand the isolation of ownership. When they first talked about creating a podcast, they feared it might feel like group therapy more than media. "We thought we'd need therapy afterward," Sam laughs now. "But what we discovered was people taking their hardest seasons and transforming

them into wisdom. We ended up laughing a lot." Listeners picked up on the difference right away. "Every single one is magic," Sam said. "Even as a co-host, I find myself learning new things on re-listens. Guests arrive willing to open their hearts, and every time, I walk away with a nugget I can use in my firm or in my life."

That openness led to unexpected levity. Sean Duncan had the team laughing off-mic. Robert Nordlander managed to fold therapy-grade insights into a Taylor Swift reference. And Tony Proctor's reflections on leadership and employees stuck with Sam long after the recording.

The recurring themes

Across twenty episodes, three themes surfaced again and again:

- Community is everything. Nearly every guest credited their survival or growth to relationships. Mentors, peers, and conferences weren't "extras"; they were lifelines. Sam remembers walking into her first major conference terrified and convinced she didn't belong. One introduction changed everything, setting off a chain of friendships and opportunities that reshaped her business.
- Boundaries save lives. Stories of burnout,



over-functioning, and working to exhaustion echoed across the season. Sam admitted to multiple periods of complete collapse, days when she couldn't get out of bed, not from laziness but from depletion. Naming this out loud resonated deeply with listeners who had been there, too. The take-away was clear: saying no, raising prices, and delegating aren't luxuries; they are survival strategies.

– Partnerships are relationships. Listeners heard both the joy and the heartbreak of building with others. Marlon Wolfman and Jeanne Hardy shared candidly about working through difficulties together, while Dan Luthi and Nick Boscia emphasized the guardrails that keep a partnership healthy. Candy's go-to analogy landed hard: "Partnerships are like dating. Chemistry is great, but compatibility over time is what matters."

When it got personal

Not all episodes stayed lighthearted. Some invited listeners into raw, vulnerable territory.

- Amanda Aguillard spoke openly about motherhood and the haunting sense of missing moments she couldn't get back.
- Kenny Harper shared the story of losing a dear friend, moving Candy to tears.
- Jeanne Hardy described juggling newborn twins while holding a business together, an impossible balance that many working mothers recognized instantly.

Sam admitted that the hardest episodes for her personally were the ones about employees, being betrayed, let down, or even harmed by those you trusted. Candy was most affected by guests who wove grief and grit into the same sentence. What might have been heavy instead became affirming: pain is real, but so is resilience.

Proof it matters

At Scaling New Heights, one of the profession's largest conferences, Candy discovered just how

much the podcast had landed. Attendees she had never met stopped her in hallways to offer long hugs and whispered confessions, things they weren't ready to share publicly but needed to say to someone who understood.

"They felt safe," she recalled, her eyes filling with tears. "The podcast gave them permission. It reminded me that even if someone doesn't want to be a guest, hearing these stories can still make them feel less alone."

This is what makes Unbalanced remarkable: it is more than content. It is community therapy, disguised as conversation.

"Unbalanced has become something rare: a safe space in an industry that often rewards polish over vulnerability."

Growing in real time

No one would mistake season one for a polished studio production. The team started with the

gear they had. Early feedback focused on sound quality. They listened, adjusted, and improved. By episode twenty, the difference was night and day, cleaner audio, smoother pacing, and a natural rhythm between two co-hosts who clearly enjoy each other.

That growth mirrors the point of the show itself: imperfection isn't failure; it's process. "Compare our first episode to our latest, and you'll hear it," Sam said. "We've come a long way."

What's ahead in season two

The second season promises not just more of the same, but deeper dives. Both hosts are eager to talk more openly about mental health and burnout, subjects still stigmatized in accounting. Sam cites sobering statistics: nearly 40% of new CPAs leave the profession within two years. "We need to talk about why," she insists.

Candy wants to broaden the conversation to include home life: illness, caregiving, divorce, shifting gender roles, and the rise of women running firms while husbands manage households. "We don't talk about this enough," she said. "But it's reality for many of us."

And for guests whose stories barely scratched the surface, part twos are already on the horizon.





The courage to rebuild

Brittany Brown



At twenty-six, Brittany thought she was living the life she'd chosen: three young children, a marriage, a rhythm of days shaped by nap schedules and family dinners. Then, without warning, it collapsed.

Her husband, suddenly a gym-going, cell-phone-carrying stranger, sat her down and told her he wanted a divorce. Within months he was married to someone else. "I was totally blindsided," she recalls. "I didn't realize my marriage was falling apart until it was just over."

The betrayal cut deeper than infidelity. He had not just left her, he had left their children, too. The children were five, three, and nine months old, and overnight Brittany was not only single but the sole parent, with no job, no degree, and a blank, terrifying horizon.

The crisis years

Fear was her first companion. "I had no experience to fall back on. The jobs I had before kids were at places like Arby's and Kmart. I had nothing to provide for three kids," she says. Childcare costs eclipsed minimum-wage options. Government assistance loomed. "I really thought homelessness was possible," she admits.

Still, she chose a different path. Instead of McDonald's shifts, she enrolled in college. An open-enrollment university allowed her to start classes that same summer. "Going back to school felt less overwhelming than trying to get a full-time job," she explains.

At first she leaned toward marketing, but introductory accounting classes sparked something unexpected: clarity. A professor nudged her to

take it seriously, pointing out that accounting had more stability and higher pay. Brittany listened. Soon she transferred to Brigham Young University, home to one of the nation's most respected accounting programs. The shift would change everything.

Stigma and solidarity

Divorced at 26, with three small children, carried weight. "Most of my peers had never even been married. I didn't know anyone my age who was divorced with kids. Dating was brutal. There was stigma everywhere," she says.

But alongside the judgment came solidarity. She sought out other single mothers, sometimes through dating apps, not for romance but friendship. "The silver lining was the women. I built a circle of single moms who are still my best friends today."

Her neighborhood became a lifeline. Her family was far away, but local women showed up. The isolation of abandonment slowly gave way to community.

A turning point

The moment her strength returned, she says, was when BYU accepted her into its world-class accounting program. "From that point on, I knew I was going to be okay. There was a clear path. It wasn't going to be easy, but it was possible."

Financial aid, a single-parent scholarship, and child support covered childcare and tuition. Recruiters sought out BYU graduates, so for the first time since the implosion of her marriage, Brittany glimpsed a future beyond fear.

Redefining love

Her divorce didn't just reshape her

career, it redefined her idea of partnership. When she was married at 19, she admits she chose her husband for the wrong reasons: charm, looks, surface appeal. "I didn't understand the traits that made somebody a good spouse," she says.

Her second marriage was different. She deliberately sought out qualities that mattered: kindness, communication, sacrifice, true partnership. "This time, I picked someone who actually showed up."

Graduate school gave her more than a degree; it gave her a partner. While she poured herself into accounting and he into an MBA, their lives intertwined. He claimed her three children as his own, and together they grew their family, first with a baby, then with an adoption that began as a neighbor's story and became their own.

Lessons for her children

Now, with her three eldest grown, Brittany reflects on what they've witnessed. "I hope they've learned resilience, that you can put your life back together when everything falls apart. That hard work and commitment to the right things matter."

They have also seen the cost of selfishness. Their father's absence, his pursuit of fleeting happiness, left him estranged. "They're polite to him, but they don't really need him. Meanwhile, our life is full: of love, of people, of opportunities. The difference is stark."

For Brittany, the choice between happiness and joy has become central. "Happiness is in-the-moment gratification. Joy comes from meaningful, long-term fulfillment. Raising kids is not always 'happy.' But the joy of who they've become? That lasts."



From fear to freedom

Today, Brittany is 46 and unrecognizable from the terrified 26-year-old she once was. She built her own accounting firm, at the forefront of flexible, remote work. She mentors employees, teaches at BYU, and has achieved what once seemed impossible: financial security, professional respect, and personal peace. “My life is full, successful, joyful. I get to decide what to do with my time,” she says.

Choosing courage

If there is one lesson she insists on sharing, it’s this: lean into fear. “Every single great thing in my life happened because I chose the path that was scarier. Going back to school. Starting a business. Choosing love again. Every time I chose courage, it paid off.” What began as betrayal became transformation. “At the time it felt like the worst thing that could happen to me,” Brittany says. “It turned out to be the best.”

“At the time it felt like the worst thing that could happen to me. It turned out to be the best.”



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Learning grace: How Monique Swansen rebuilt her life after a devas- tating injury

Monique Swansen

When Monique Swansen laced up her cleats for a casual over-30 indoor soccer game, she had no idea her life was about to change forever.

"I had the ball and was heading toward the goal," she recalls. "I planted my left foot and it gave way. My knee bent completely backward. I needed help off the field right away."

What followed was a whirlwind: a trip to the hospital, shocking x-rays, and the news that her injury wasn't just serious—it was potentially life-altering. Doctors told her she had a displaced tibial plateau fracture, a severe break that left her at risk of losing her leg.

A fight for recovery

Monique was only 34 years old at the time, with two young sons in kindergarten and second grade. She had surgery to repair the break, which required two plates and 14 titanium screws, and endured a major complication, a blood clot in her leg.

"I was non-weight-bearing for nine

months," she says. "I was in a wheelchair or hobbling around on crutches, while still trying to parent and work full-time."

Her husband's job took him away from home early each morning, so her father moved in to help shuttle the boys to the bus stop and keep the household running. Friends and teammates rallied too, delivering home-cooked meals and groceries. "It really took a village," Monique remembers. "I couldn't have done it without my family, my dad, and my community."

The challenges of healing

The physical toll was staggering. Monique endured 18 months of grueling physical therapy, nerve damage, and a second surgery to repair her ACL. For years she lived with constant pain.

"There were moments I wondered if it would have been better if they amputated," she admits. "I thought, maybe then it wouldn't hurt so much."

Her recovery tested not only her strength, but her patience. "I'm a far more patient person now," she says.

"That accident changed me in all the ways."

Even through the darkest days, she clung to small joys. Reading Harry Potter with her sons became a ritual during long days of rest and rehabilitation. Later, as her mobility returned, her boys grew more protective, especially her youngest, who anxiously reminded her to "be careful" when she returned to skiing and hiking.

Lessons learned

The accident left lasting scars. Monique can no longer run, and her knee still aches after long hikes, but it also gave her a new perspective.

"It was the first big thing in my life that made me think, don't wait until tomorrow," she says. "Do the things you want to do today."

She also learned the importance of asking questions. Released from the ER too soon, she now knows how dangerous that could have been. "If I had more life experience back then, I would have pushed back," she reflects. "Another lesson, don't just blindly follow instructions."



Perhaps the biggest takeaway was learning to care for herself. In the middle of juggling work, motherhood, and recovery, she often put herself last. “Women especially are so hard on themselves,” she says. “We feel like we need to do all of the things. I wish I had been kinder to myself.”

A new approach to self-care

Today, Monique continues to prioritize healing, both physical and emotional. She still ices her knee after long hikes, but she also listens to her needs in a deeper way.

“Self-care is giving myself little extras,” she says. “Like this past weekend, leaving work early on

Friday to spend time in Maine, hiking and being outdoors. That’s what fills me up.”

Looking back, she sees her accident as a turning point. “Hard times make you resilient,” she says. “And no matter what happens, there’s always some good that comes out of it. Always.”

Monique’s lessons for life

Throughout her story, Monique shared small but powerful truths, insights hard-won through pain, patience, and perspective. Here are the takeaways she carries forward:

- **Don’t wait until tomorrow.** Do the things you want to do today.
- **Ask questions.** Don’t blindly follow

advice, advocate for yourself.

- **Nobody’s indispensable.** Take care of yourself; the work will still get done.

- **Give yourself grace.** Don’t be too hard on yourself during hard moments.

- **Self-care matters.** Find what restores you and make it non-negotiable.

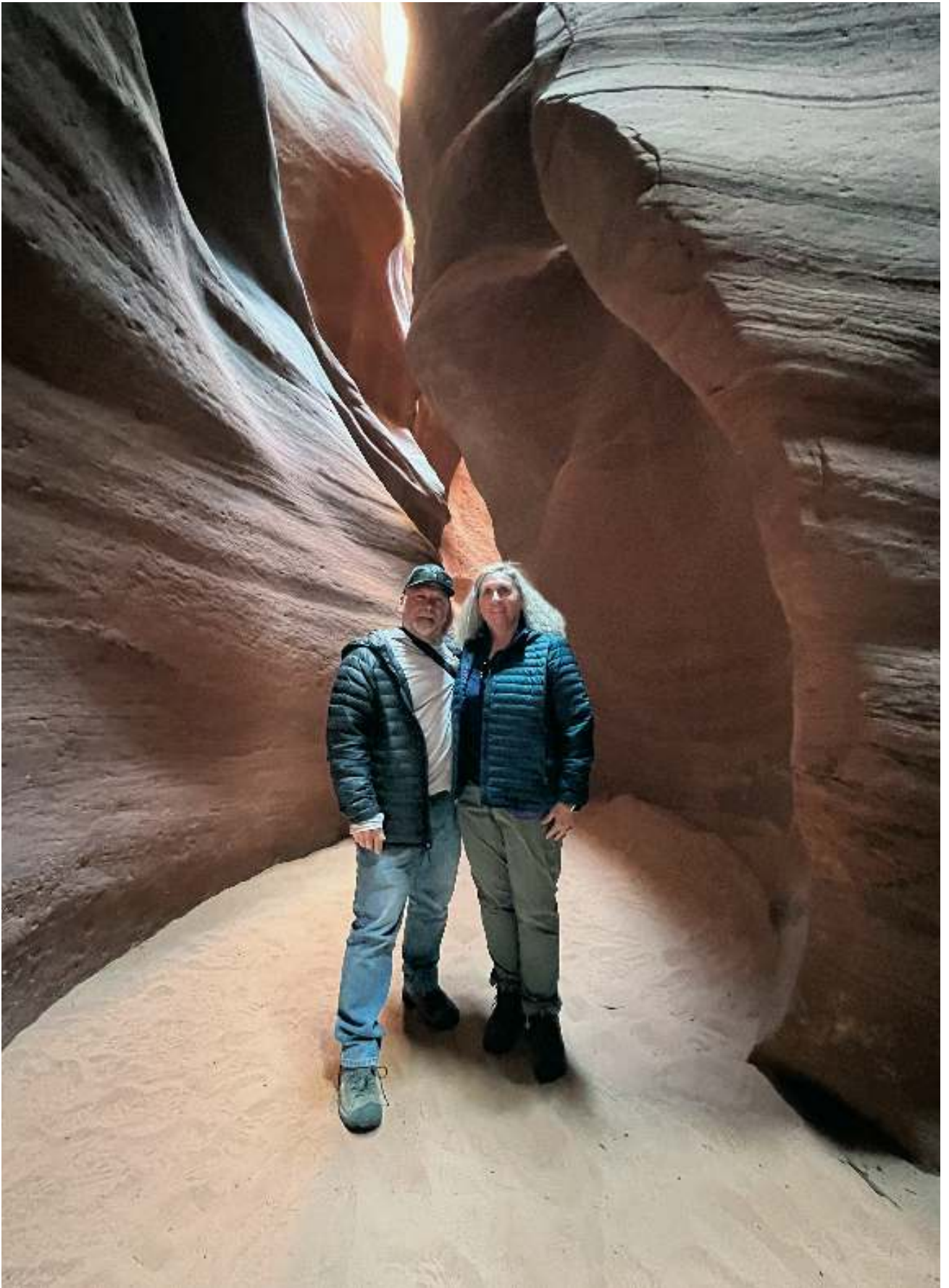
- **Invest in community.** When times get tough, your people will carry you.

- **Patience is a muscle.** Long recoveries teach you to slow down and accept the process.

- **Hard times build resilience.** Even when it hurts, some good always comes out of it.

“Self-care is giving myself little extras. Like leaving work early on Friday to spend time in Maine, hiking and being outdoors. That’s what fills me up.”





Julie DeLong

The slow evolution of Julie DeLong

When Julie DeLong looks back on her early years, what strikes her most is not a single defining decision but the absence of one. “I was one of those people who couldn’t decide what they wanted to learn,” she recalls. “I bounced around to a bunch of different departments. By the time I needed to graduate, I had way too many credits.”

Economics, ultimately, became her degree, not out of passion or strategy, but because it was the most practical way to finish. “It was interesting, yes, but not anything I thought I’d build a career around.” At the time, graduate school seemed like the next logical step. She was good at school, so why not keep doing it?

But her friend, Alex Mic-Podar, offered a blunt observation, “you’re only considering grad school so you can postpone making real adult decisions.” Julie laughs at the memory now. “She was right. I didn’t want research or a thesis. I just didn’t know what else to do.”

That wake-up call nudged her toward the work-

force, a reality that was more sobering than liberating. “You find a job posting, get excited, pour time into an application, and then hear nothing. It was disappointing.” What began as a practical need for part-time work led her to an office assistant role at a snowboard shop, and with it, the first spark of her accounting career.

Discovering a love for numbers

“I liked accounting almost immediately,” Julie says. “The organization of it, the puzzle-like quality of figuring out how things work, it just clicked.”

She laughs when remembering how her economics background briefly resurfaced. Out of curiosity, she ran a regression analysis to measure the impact of snowfall on snowboard sales. “I calculated that one extra inch of snow meant an extra thousand dollars in revenue. I showed my boss, and he just looked at me and said, ‘What am I going to do with this information?’” It was a telling moment: Julie’s love for struc-



ture and frameworks was real, but the practical application would take time to shape.

A shift in mindset

Julie's father had always imagined a different path for her. A mathematician and systems engineer who built a career at Hughes Aircraft, he believed in the old promise of security: a good

"I calculated that one extra inch of snow meant an extra thousand dollars in revenue. I showed my boss, and he just looked at me and said, What am I going to do with this information?"

company, a steady paycheck, long-term loyalty. Julie, at first, assumed that was the right path too. But the world had changed. "I don't think working for someone else is the safer option anymore," she says. "The safe thing is learning how to adapt. Building business skills. Figuring out how to survive change."

That adaptability was something Julie didn't yet have, but Alex did. Having grown up moving from country to country, Alex had developed survival instincts out of necessity. Julie, by contrast, was used to structure: "Give me the program, I'll sit down and do the work." Together, the two became unlikely but complementary partners, slowly building a business that leaned on both of their strengths.

Learning the hard way

The growth was anything but linear. Their first employee hire, Julie admits, was "a complete disaster." Still, they tried again, cautiously, then confidently. A few part-time employees became a small firm. A small firm became something larger.

One turning point came in 2010, when they hired a business coach. "They were terrible coaches," Julie laughs, "but they were great at sales." While the advice wasn't groundbreaking,

the experience pushed Julie and Alex to rethink their own process.

The traditional sales model, multi-step discovery calls and polished presentations, didn't feel right for them. Instead, they designed a system where potential clients could get a price at the very first meeting. "Why drag it out if you don't have to?" Julie asks. That decision

alone accelerated growth and set the tone for their future approach: practical, efficient, and unafraid to break the rules.

Ahead of the curve

Another key shift came in

2011, when Julie and Alex made the then-radical decision to close their physical office and go fully remote. A decade before it became the norm, they were experimenting with video conferencing and cloud storage.

"We had to figure it all out from scratch, communication tools, document sharing, how to manage a remote workforce." For someone who never pictured herself as a manager, the adjustment was profound. "I don't think I'm a great manager even today," Julie says with honesty. "I manage because I have to. But over time, we got good at hiring, and that changed everything."

At their peak, the firm employed nearly 50 people. Today, they operate with about 30, a deliberate shift that reflects both hard lessons and smarter systems.

Surviving the great resignation

COVID brought unique challenges. Many of their employees were stay-at-home mothers. When schools closed and households shifted, attrition hit hard. Instead of fighting it, Julie let it happen. "The people who stayed were the ones who were truly committed, who had the time and energy to give." In response, Julie and Alex invested in tools that increased accountability and efficiency, enabling them to produce more

with fewer people.

"It was painful," Julie admits. "But it forced us to build systems that ultimately made us better."

Teacher, manager, or something else?

When asked if she ever imagined herself as a teacher, Julie pauses. "That's something I could picture for myself back then. But I've realized I'm not great at teaching either, at least not consistently."

What she is good at, she's learned, is building frameworks. "If we're launching a new service, I can map out every piece it will touch: onboarding, sales, training, documentation. I can't do all of it myself, but I can see how it all fits together. That's my strength."

It's a revelation that feels like a natural extension of the way she first fell in love with accounting, the behind-the-scenes architecture that makes things run.

Mistakes as milestones

Julie is quick to acknowledge her missteps. The wrong hires. The projects that started too late. The time wasted on things that didn't work. And yet, she has no regrets.

"Every mistake taught us something that made us better the next time. That's the slow evolution. You don't leap forward overnight, you inch forward, sometimes by trial and error."

She lights up when talking about others who have reinvented themselves,

especially later in life. One friend in her 40s went from a struggling massage therapist to a multimillion-dollar coach, independent musician, and bodybuilder, all within a few years.

"Seeing that reminds me anything is possible," Julie says. "I'm only halfway through my life. What else can I do?"

Health, patience, and perspective

This past year brought personal challenges, a broken ankle, lingering heart issues, and the

looming reality of an ablation surgery. Julie describes it as a "reality check."

"These are old-person problems," she says with a laugh, "and suddenly I'm the old person." But rather than discouragement, she finds motivation. "I want to rebuild my energy and rediscover old hobbies, music, writing, maybe something new."

Her perspective on growth mirrors the lessons of her business. "People overestimate what they can do in a short time and underestimate what they can do in a long time. Ten years ago, I would have laughed if you told me where we'd be today. But small, consistent efforts compound. That's where the magic happens."

What's next?

Julie doesn't pretend to have all the answers. She's still evolving, still experimenting, still building. "Alex and I are working on new things for the business that we're really excited about, but it's too early to share."

What she does know is this: the next decades may be her best. "The accounting industry is changing rapidly. It's easy to see that as scary. But I've learned those moments of change are also moments of opportunity."

The slow evolution

Julie's journey doesn't fit the script of an overnight success story. It's quieter, steadier, and

"Every mistake taught us something that made us better the next time."

perhaps more radical for its lack of drama. She didn't set out to be a business owner. She didn't plan to lead a team of dozens. She didn't chart a course with precision.

Instead, she adapted. She learned. She built frameworks, made mistakes, and tried again. "The slow evolution," she says, "is what gets you there. You just have to be patient."

Shea Keats

How travel taught Shea to slow down and savor life



Where it all began

When Shea looks back on her childhood, it's not shelves of new toys or the latest sneakers that come to mind. It's boarding passes. Her parents always found a way to put her on planes and trains, taking her across oceans while she was still in high school.

Those trips cracked her world wide open. New languages, new foods, and the realization that there are countless ways to live a life gave her a perspective she carries to this day. "My parents always prioritized experiences," she says, "and we had stamps in our passports to prove it. That changed me."



Surprise discoveries

Now an adult, Shea still looks for that spark of discovery, not just in the obvious postcard cities but in the unexpected ones too. One of her favorite recent memories wasn't Paris or Rome. It was Winnipeg. The Canadian city charmed her with its walkable neighborhoods, delicious food, and the joy of stumbling into something special without planning it to death.

"I think that's the beauty of travel," she explains. "You realize it doesn't have to be glamorous to be meaningful."

Rituals that matter

For Shea, the most powerful souvenirs aren't things she can pack in a suitcase. They're the moments she teaches herself to hold onto. Over the years, she has developed a ritual on every trip: at some point each day, she pauses, with no camera or phone, just herself, and takes a mental photograph.

"It's easy to let travel blur together," she says. "I want to make sure I'm really in it."

It's a habit that's spilled into the rest of her life. At home and at work, she makes space to notice small details, whether it's the way morning light hits her kitchen table or the sound of laughter during dinner with friends.

Keeping it light

Shea has also learned that travel isn't about lugging around the perfect gear. Her philosophy is simple: the lighter the load, the freer she feels. Disinfecting wipes are her practical staple, and a collapsible electric kettle comes along to make even the most basic hotel room or Airbnb feel a little like home.

"I don't need a lot of stuff," she says with a laugh. "If I've got the basics and I can move easily, that's when I feel most free."

No wrong way

When asked if she prefers a "trip" or a "vacation," Shea doesn't bother choosing. For her, the labels don't matter. A weekend at a lodge

can be as restorative as a carefully planned getaway. A work trip can hold just as many discoveries as a big adventure.

"What I don't buy into is the idea that there's only one right way to travel," she explains.

"Sometimes you want rest. Sometimes you want adventure. Sometimes you want both on the same day. Why not?"

Dreams ahead

Still, some places live on her dream list. Japan with its mix of ancient traditions and modern innovation. The dramatic landscapes of New Zealand. The wide horizons of Australia. Shea hopes to see them all someday.

But she refuses to wait for the perfect moment. Instead, she embraces day trips, long weekends, and local adventures as much as international escapes. "Life is too short to wait for the perfect trip," she says.

Gratitude on the road

At the heart of it all, what matters to Shea isn't the miles traveled or the number of stamps in her passport. It's the gratitude that comes with each experience, watching a sunset with her partner, laughing with friends in a new city, sipping coffee in a quiet square far from home. "The most important thing," she says softly, "is to notice the moment while you're in it."

For Shea, travel isn't about bragging rights or flawless itineraries. It's about choosing to savor life wherever her feet land.



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