Elevé

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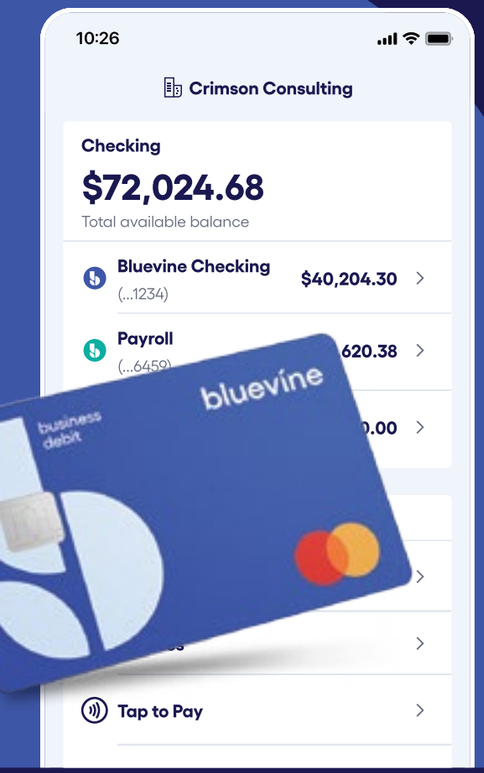
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Never miss an issue of Élevé

This fourth edition celebrates the people who keep firms running behind the scenes, the operations professionals whose work makes everything else possible. Because a job title only ever tells part of the story, we asked each of them the same question: what would surprise someone to know about you? What follows is a chance to dive deeper into a part of their lives not many people know about.

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.
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Milli Bruce

Letter From the Editor

Every business runs on a certain kind of person: the one who keeps things moving, catches what matters, and makes the whole operation look effortless. Not because it's easy. Because they're that good at it.

This issue is all about them. The operations people who keep everything running behind the scenes, making it all look easy.

Because a job title only ever tells part of the story, we asked each of them the same question: what would surprise someone to know about you? What follows is a chance to dive deeper into a part of their lives not many people know about.

I spent this edition getting to know twenty-eight of them, and here's what stood out to me most: the same steadiness that makes them so good at what they do shows up everywhere else in their lives too. It's not something they turn on for work. It's just who they are.

That's what this issue is really celebrating: not just what these twenty-eight people do, but the part of themselves they don't often share, a version of who they used to be, a memory they hadn't spoken of in years, something vulnerable they've simply kept close, until now. A pause before someone decided to trust me with the part they don't usually explain. A voice softening right before the real answer came out. Those moments are the whole reason this issue exists.

If there's one thing I hope stays with you, it's this. Not that these twenty-eight people are exceptional despite everything on their plate, but that the same qualities that make them so good at their jobs are the ones shaping the rest of their lives too. Steady. Present. All in, wherever



they show up.

Thank you to all twenty-eight of you for trusting me with your stories. And thank you, as always, for reading.

With heart,
Haley Kershner,
Customer Marketing
Manager, Anchor



Dawn Ankiewicz

Clearing the Runway

Everyone assumes the veteran plates belong to her husband. They don't. Before the books and the New Hampshire quiet, Dawn Ankiewicz ran a Navy control tower in Sicily, and the eighteen-year-old who left home to do it never fully left.

Ask Dawn Ankiewicz what people are surprised to learn about her, and she doesn't hesitate. "People look at me and don't ever really think that I'm a veteran," she says. And yet, Dawn spent five years in the Navy as an air traffic controller, directing planes from a tower in Sicily. She left home at eighteen because it was, honestly, her only real option. She wasn't headed to college. She wanted out, and independence, and something new. "I just wanted to get out and explore," she says. What she didn't expect was how much of that girl she'd carry forward.

The plates are the small, recurring version of it. She'll be driving around, and people will nod at her husband, who did serve. Dawn's answer is dry and unbothered.

"Hello, I could do it too."

She was raised in California and had no path laid out, no plan pinned to a corkboard. College wasn't for her, and even if it had been, the logistics never added up. "Who was gonna send me," she says. The Navy was the door that was actually open. It was a job. It would be consistent. It came with benefits, and eventually it would pay for school. It also came with the one thing she wanted most, which was somewhere else to be.

Boot camp came first, in Chicago, shortly after she graduated high school. It was her first real stretch away from home, and it began, as boot camp does, with someone yelling. She laughs about it now. She'd go back and do it again.

Then came air traffic control school, the simulators, the procedures. And then a piece of paper that changed the shape of her twenties. She had submitted a list of her top three duty stations, never expecting to land the first one.

She landed the first one. Sicily. Sigonella.

Nothing prepared her for the arrival. She stepped off the plane onto the ramp and walked, taking in an airport that looked nothing like the ones back home. She had no idea how to get to the base and no one waiting to show her. What she had was instinct. She spotted a few people who looked like they might be military, or at least might know the way, and asked if she could share a taxi.

"No one was there to meet me. I was just on my own."

That sentence turns out to be the whole story in miniature. In Sicily, for the first time, there was no one to make her doctor's appointments or figure out dinner or handle the small machinery of a life. At first it flattened her. She thought, more than once, that maybe she just wouldn't go to the doctor, because she didn't know how to call and make the appointment and didn't want to ask. And then, slowly, she did the thing anyway. Then the next thing.

"I guess it's all on me," she remembers thinking. "So I just started doing it."

There is a particular pleasure she still remembers from that season, the quiet luxury of not having to check with anyone. "I didn't have to ask anyone or get permission for anything," she says. For a girl who had leaned on her parents and her friends for nearly everything, it was a revelation.

Here is the part that makes the story worth telling: Dawn is an introvert. Not in the casual, self-deprecating way people use the word now, but in the freezes-when-put-on-the-spot way. "When I left, I was super shy. I hated talking to strangers," she says. Which is a genuinely strange starting point for a job whose entire premise is talking to strangers, over a radio, with authority.

She picked it because it sounded interesting, and because it wasn't quite what she pictured. Looking back, she finds her younger self a little funny. "Now you have to talk to strangers, and you have to be the boss of these strangers you're talking to over the radio."

The tower was busier than most people imagine, and never busier than in the stretch right after September 11th.





"No one was there to meet me. I was just on my own."

Dawn Ankiewicz

Sigonella became a stop for a flood of aircraft, and the traffic increased enormously. New kinds of planes needed procedures she hadn't used. Aircraft parked in places aircraft don't usually park. More planes meant more vehicles, more people, and every one of them needed to talk to the tower to move an inch. It ran twenty-four hours a day.

What surprised her most wasn't the planes. It was the sheer web of coordination behind them, the people in the same room, the people down the street, the people in another state, the notes clattering in over the teletype, the constant triage. You could be in a clean rhythm with your aircraft when an emergency landed and forced you to rebuild the entire plan on the spot.

"It's not like you're just standing there looking out a window telling an airplane where to go."

If that sounds like a description of her workday now, that's the point. The skills didn't retire when she did. Ask her colleague Beth, and you'll hear that Dawn doesn't forget anything. Ask Dawn, and she'll credit the tower: remembering where things are, where a project left off, what still needs doing, holding all the pieces so none of them fall apart. She's a good listener, aware of her surroundings, and things simply stick. A client mentions loving the caramel apples at the fair, and six months later, when it's time to send a gift, Dawn is the one who remembers to send caramel something.

Air traffic control, for the record, was never her passion. The forceful part, telling officers what to do when she wasn't an officer, intimidated her. What she loved was everything around it. The traveling. The people. Being on her own.

After Sicily came Point Mugu, in California, closer to family, her last duty station. Then a decision that ended one life and started another. She'd had a daughter, and the Navy wanted a plan for who would raise her if Dawn deployed. She went back and forth. Getting out meant starting over as a single mom, and starting over was hard, hard enough that she thought about going back in just for the familiar paycheck. But she couldn't hand her daughter off and disappear for long stretches.

"The military wasn't a mistake, and I would totally do it again," she says. "But at that point in my life, I needed to go a different way."

The going-a-different-way is still unspooling. Her husband, it turns out, was there in Sicily the whole time. They worked together, different shifts, barely more than a passing hello, for two years. Eight years later they reconnected on MySpace. They've been married sixteen years now, with two kids.

"It's weird to think how things work out," she says. "The decisions you make have impact on your whole life."

New Hampshire is the longest she has ever lived anywhere. That's its own quiet marvel for a woman who once measured her life in duty stations. She tells her kids the same thing she once told herself, standing on a foreign ramp with no ride and no one waiting.





"Don't sit around and think about it. If there's something you want to do, just go do it. That time is going to pass regardless."



"For years we talked about building a real client master list, and for years we just lived with a pile of half-updated spreadsheets that nobody could keep straight. Nobody assigned this to Dawn. She taught herself how to use AI and built us an intranet portal that answers every single frustration we'd been complaining about for a decade. It's beautiful, and it works. That's Dawn: she sees the thing everyone else has learned to tolerate, and she goes and fixes it." - ***Beth Carter, BBA Bookkeeping, CEO***



Kristin Bradley

Better Than She Could Have Imagined

From an Ohio town where no one ever left to a life measured in roughly ten moves across twenty years, Kristin Bradley learned that the hardest part of starting over is letting go of the life you thought you'd have.

Kristin Bradley grew up in a small town in Ohio, the kind of place where no one ever moved. You stayed, or you stayed close. She assumed her own life would follow that same quiet gravity. Instead she has packed and unpacked a household roughly ten times in twenty years, followed a calling that was never hers alone, and built a home on two continents. The surprise isn't the moving. It's the letting go. "It's hard to let go of expectations sometimes," Kristin says, describing the slow work of releasing the life she once pictured for herself. What replaced it, she will tell you without hesitation, turned out better than she could have imagined.

None of it was the plan. There wasn't a plan, exactly, just an assumption, the kind you absorb from a place rather than choose. Where she grew up, no one had served in the military. No one in her family, no one she knew. You grew up, you stayed near home, and your kids grew up near their cousins. That was simply how life went.

She and her husband met in high school and have been together since they were sixteen. They were seniors when 9/11 happened, old enough to understand that the world had changed overnight and would not change back. He wouldn't have called it a turning point at the time. Looking back, she thinks it settled into him quietly, and shaped what came next.



They went to John Carroll University together, a Jesuit school in Cleveland. He joined ROTC, commissioned after graduation, and before they were even married, learned that his first assignment would be Germany.

They arrived young and broke and wide-eyed, with



no money and no stuff and no real idea what they were doing. "My gosh, I had no idea. I really had no idea," she says. It was, she thinks now, the best possible way to begin.

They treated it as an adventure, because that's what it was.

They traveled all over Europe. They met people they are still close to twenty years later. Somewhere in there, her husband deployed to Afghanistan for the first time, in the thick of the years when everyone they knew was deploying, all the time. A lot of growing up happened over there. She wouldn't trade any of it.

The hard part came later, and it didn't look like hardship from the outside.

About five years ago, the family moved to Virginia, and something she had been holding at arm's length finally landed. "It really, really hit me for the first time that this is our life," she remembers. Not a detour. Not something they were doing for a little while before heading back to Ohio. They were never going back to Ohio. Her kids were not going to grow up down the street from their cousins. Whole versions of a life were simply not going to happen.

"It was a little painful, to be honest," she says.

But letting go of the life she'd pictured made room for the one she actually had. She started to see it as a life of service, one the whole family shares in, not just her husband. That shift, she says, changed everything.

Ask her what she's proudest of, and she goes straight to the hardest stretch. There was a two-year period when her husband deployed back to back, six months and then nine, with constant temporary duty in between. She had two small children at the time, and had their third somewhere in the middle of it. All three were under five.

"It was a little painful, to be honest," she says.

Kristin Bradley

"I don't know how I did that. It was so hard," she says.

She did it. Everyone came through. The kids, she notes, never knew anything was unusual, and they thrived. It's the kind of thing that hands you a hard, permanent confidence.

It also taught her something she passes on now. "You don't have to do it all on your own," she says. She had help available and didn't ask for it, and she burned out toward the end, and it didn't have to be that hard. "You don't have to suffer. You don't have to make it so hard on yourself when you have more options."

The thing she rebuilds every single time is community, and it's the hardest thing on the list. Military families, she says, make friends at a speed that would startle most people. They skip the small talk and get straight to the point. She met someone recently and talked for five minutes. "I know her entire life story, in the best way," she says.





She heard once that it takes a hundred and sixty hours with someone to feel like a close friend. She did the math against how long she usually gets in one place. So you learn to move faster, to build a life out of activities and routine and the same familiar faces, until a place tips over into feeling like home.

Her kids have paid into this life too, and gotten something back that's hard to teach. Two boys and a daughter, going into second and seventh grade among them, and all of them astonishingly adaptable. Good at making friends, good with adults, good at walking into a strange situation and simply figuring it out.

"They're used to pivoting. They're used to being flexible. They're used to change," she says.

This June, the family moved back to Virginia, to a cute, old-fashioned neighborhood in Alexandria where the kids ride their bikes around with their friends all day. She's hoping to stay put for a while. She already knows the place, which gives her a rare head start, a little room to breathe and to turn back toward her own work.

Ask her what she hopes this chapter brings, and she doesn't reach for anything grand. Her husband loves his job. Her boys have their friends. Her daughter, going into second grade, is still finding her people.

"I just want each person to be content," she says. "I just hope each person has what they need, so they can feel comfortable."

Twenty years in, she describes the whole of it as a calling, one the entire family participates in, 365 days a year, whether anyone is moving or deploying or not. It has cost her things. It has also, in her own accounting, made her who she is. It strengthened her marriage. It strengthened her family.

And she wants to make one thing known: that military spouses are a hidden gem for the employers lucky enough to keep them, and that hiring and supporting them matters more than most people realize. For any employer curious how to do exactly that, she points to the Military Spouse Employment Partnership: https://msepjobs.militaryonesource.mil/msep/

Better than she could have imagined. She said it plainly, about a life she never chose so much as grew into, and somewhere across ten moves and twenty years, made entirely her own.



"People see Kristin's steadiness and assume it's her nature. What they don't know is that strength was built over time out of necessity, as a military spouse who has had to rebuild her life again and again. She turned that resilience into a superpower. It's why she can be the captain for 40+ advisors and our whole HQ team without hesitation." ***– Michelle Röse, COO | Founder | Advisor, Breakaway Advising***

Cristi Jones

Thirty-Three Years, and Grateful for Every One



A brother lost to the Gulf, a mother lost to ALS, and the long, deliberate lesson that taught her how to grieve on purpose.

To meet Cristi Jones now, you would not guess how much she has weathered. Twice, grief arrived at her door, and twice she answered it as a different person. The first time she was nineteen, standing in a church parking lot in Florida when another mother's scream told her what the search parties had not yet confirmed. The second time she was thirty-three, watching her mother and business partner slip away one function at a time. "I was a pretty miserable human being for a couple of years," she says of that first loss. What she learned in the distance between the two is the quieter, harder thing: that grief can be met on purpose, and that the meeting changes everything.

It began before eleven in the morning, at a restaurant near her college where she was working. Her childhood best friend walked through the door. It was strange to see her there before opening. "We have to go," the friend said. Her brother was missing in Florida. He had been on a school field trip.

He was fourteen. He was her only sibling. He'd had a hard time at home, and he had found himself at a boarding school about an hour and a half away, the Darlington School, where, for the first time in a long time, he was happy. He made friends with everybody, especially the international students who, like him, lived on campus.

"He was so happy there," Cristi remembers. "He was really, really funny."

Then the field trip. A storm that had been forecast. Children in canoes and kayaks on the water in February with no adequate communication equipment. They were all scared before they even reached their destination. By the time the group reached the islands where they were meant to camp, the islands were underwater from storms in seasons past. Ten kids and two adults set out; eight children and both adults were pulled from the water by helicopter. Her brother and his best friend were not.

She rode down to Florida with her grandparents. What she remembers next is the map.

They were at the police station, studying a search grid while boats and helicopters worked the water where the Suwannee River empties into the Gulf. Cristi has always been a fixer. She wanted a task, a way to help find him. Then an officer came over, took the map from their hands, and told them to head back to the church, where the other families were waiting, the ones whose children had already been found.

As they got out of the car in the parking lot, she heard screaming, and for one bright second she thought it meant they had found him.

Then she heard the other boy's mother. "Not my baby," at the top of her lungs.

They learned it there, in the parking lot, before anyone walked inside.

The funeral drew more than a thousand people, with news trucks parked outside. Before the service, Cristi went in to see her brother and thought there was too much makeup on him, that he didn't look like himself. She turned and ran out of the church, insisting it wasn't him, and had to be steered back inside, away from the cameras. For two or three months afterward she had the same dream: that she arrived at the funeral and it wasn't him, and then woke back into the fact that it was.

"I don't remember a whole lot of the next two years of my life."

She was angry, at God, at the world, at the unfairness of it landing on someone so young. Someone would mention a headache and she would think, but you have a brother. She had no empathy to spare. She hated being the girl people wanted to hug, the pity case, and she kept everyone at arm's length. She had turned away from the faith her mother built the family on, and she ran from the grief instead of facing it.

"My life kind of blew up around me, unrelated







to it, just because of my attitude."

Fourteen years later, in 2016, her mother was diagnosed with ALS.

They had been inseparable. They owned a two-person tax firm together and worked side by side every day, roughly a thousand clients between them. During tax season they wouldn't cook. They'd have their husbands bring the kids and meet them for dinner, because who had anything left after a day like that.

Cristi knew almost nothing about ALS, only the ice bucket videos everyone had shared. Her mother, rational and steady, not one to overreact, led even this. Her first words after the diagnosis were about her daughter. "This isn't hereditary. It's not something you're going to get."

She went looking for every option. She flew to Thailand for two weeks of stem cell injections that were not yet legal in the United States. She felt better for a couple of weeks. It didn't hold.

Over the next two years, Cristi watched her mother lose one function at a time.

Her mother could still speak for the first six or eight months, long enough to record voice notes to tuck inside stuffed animals for her grandchildren. She set the tone for how the family would carry it. No sitting around lamenting. Parties, visitors, quality time. "We're going to do what we're going to do."

When the firm landed entirely on Cristi's shoulders, her mother told her to close it. "Just close it. I'll take care of you."

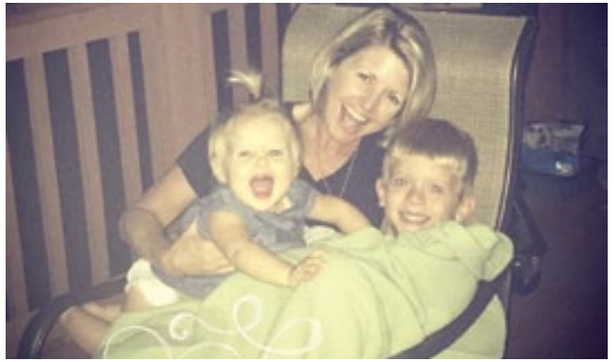
Cristi said no. "You worked thirty years for this company. I can keep it going to sell."

Her mother's answer was the same reassurance she offered everything. "Okay. You can. But if you don't, it's okay."

So Cristi turned her grief into determination, and this time she did the thing she had not done at nineteen. She faced it. Therapy and self-reflection were a large part of that. It charted the course to a healing journey, being able to care for her family that was also grieving such a great loss, and eventually landing in one of the most satisfying and enjoyable professional roles she has ever had.

"The first time, I didn't acknowledge it. The second time, we were going to cherish this experience even though it's bad, and use it for good somehow."





She is friends with her ex-husband. They co-parent so easily that their daughter sees them joking together, and she guards that on purpose.

"You can have boundaries and empathy at the same time. Those things can live together."

The point, for her, was never permission to leave. It was how you leave. "If you can walk away feeling like you gave it a hundred percent, and you exit with kindness, that is the most important thing in the world." She watched her mother navigate change that way and took the lesson down to the studs.

If her mother could see her now, Cristi has an idea of what she'd say, because she asks herself the question most days. Not simply that she's proud. That she should keep leading with kindness, and keep raising her kids in it. "Always choose that fight. That's a battle worth choosing every single time."

For anyone reading this in the middle of their own loss, she offers the thing she wishes she'd known at nineteen.

"The sun is going to rise and the sun is going to set. How you care for your own heart, and the hearts of the people around you, in between those times, determines how long this is a challenge for you."

Grieve, she says, but grieve from a place of gratitude. Accept the flowers and the clumsy words with grace, because it means someone was carrying you. Take the day off if you need it. "You don't get a cookie for delaying grief." And don't run the way she once did, because running doesn't work. "If you ignore it, it will be waiting for you 365 sunrises from now."

There is a detail that holds the whole difference. In the years after her mother's death, clients would still come into the office and break down crying about her, the woman who had been Cristi's partner and best friend. Imagine doing someone's taxes while they weep about your late mother. Cristi chose to hear it as evidence of how loved she had been.

"Having her for thirty-three years beats having someone else's mom for a hundred."

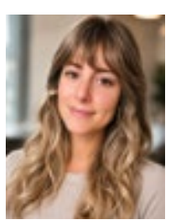
Both losses left her holding the same sentence, the one everyone reaches for: life is too short. But she is careful about what she means by it.

Life's too short is not a license to quit without notice, or torch a friendship, or blow up a marriage on the way out.

Then there is the part she saves for last, almost as an aside, the one that sounds like the universe handing something back.

She has a son who looks just like her brother. She named him after her brother. He acts just like him too, funny in the same way, a carbon copy walking around her house.

"God is really funny," she says.



"Cristi Jone's fingerprints are on parts of Anchor that most people would never know about. She has a rare ability to spot where an experience could be better and think through how that improvement should work not just for Two Roads, but for firms she will never meet. She consistently partners with us to create solutions that give service providers more flexibility and more value, while keeping her own clients in steady hands the entire time. Heart, ownership, grit, exponential value - the four values we hold ourselves to at Anchor. I have watched Cristi live every one of them from the other side of the table." ***- Rebecca Shain, Team Lead Customer Success, Anchor***

Kiri Levie

The Woman Underneath

For years she avoided one word. Now Kiri Levie is saying the rest of the story out loud: four kids, a life rebuilt from the ground up, and the quiet, powerful discovery of who she is on her own.

For years, Kiri Levie tied her whole worth to being a wife and a mother, the two roles she had dreamed of since she was a little girl. Then, four years ago, one of them ended, and she found herself scrambling to fill every empty hour so she would not have to sit alone with the loss. She has said the word "divorced" maybe twice in all that time. What people see when they meet Kiri is a hiker, a musician, a mom of four teenagers. What they do not see is the quieter, harder thing she has been building underneath it all: a relationship with herself. "I feel different," she says. "Friends who've known me a long time say I'm a completely different person than I was five years ago. And I do, I feel it."

Start with the word itself, because Kiri does. She almost never says "divorced." She calls the man she was married to for seventeen and a half years "my kids' dad." She has reached for "ex husband" exactly once, cornered on a phone call with an insurance company that could not follow her. Everywhere else, she softens it. "I'm no longer married." "I'm actually single."

This is not avoidance so much as intention. "Language is really important," she says. "For me, divorce just carries such a negative stigma. It's all wrapped up in those words: guilt and shame and fear and loneliness and loss." She noticed something telling, too. When other people say they are divorced, she feels nothing. The weight is hers alone, and she has been careful about where she sets it down.

To understand what came apart, you have to understand how deliberately she had built it.

Kiri went to college on a full academic scholarship. She started in engineering. She wanted to work for NASA, to build spacecraft, and she was serious about astronomy. Then, a year in, she stopped and asked whether the life she was training for matched the life she actually wanted. It did not. She switched to accounting for one clear-eyed reason: it was work she could eventually do from home, on her own terms, once she had children. Being a mother was never a fallback. It was the plan the rest of her life was built around.

So when her first baby arrived, she left public accounting without a second thought. "I loved every second of it," she says. She read to her daughter, taught her, poured herself in completely. Years later, when her oldest was about eight, she stepped back toward work by helping her sister build the financial side of a new salon.

She loved all of it. She would also, later, name





the cost of loving it that way.

"I had wrapped my worth so much, and my identity so much, into these roles of wife and mother that I didn't really know who I was without those."

When the marriage ended, that was the ground that gave way. Not just a relationship, but the entire architecture she had used to answer the question of who she was.

The early days of rebuilding did not look like rebuilding. They looked like motion. When her kids were not with her, Kiri refused to be home. She filled every free weekend, every open hour, with plans, with friends, with work, with anything at all. "I just pushed myself to be as busy as possible," she says, "so that I didn't have to sit with loneliness. So I didn't have to sit with any of the feelings." She had always measured her worth in productivity. Now she leaned on it like a crutch. As long as she was doing enough, she was still someone.

It could not hold. Eventually the busyness started to feel unsustainable, then genuinely unhealthy, and she arrived at a harder assignment than staying busy. She had to figure out who she was underneath all of it.

She sat down one day and tried to write a list of things she liked. She could not think of a single one.

The healing, when it came, came in small, deliberate acts rather than one big turn. She points to year three as the pivotal one, the stretch when the internal work she had been putting in finally began to pay dividends. She is quick to point out she did not do this alone. "It was a lot of internal work and growth, but I couldn't have done any of it without my faith in God, who brought opportunities into my life just when I was ready to receive them," she says, "and without my village, especially my best friend, who scraped me off the sidewalk multiple times when I needed it. Her therapist had given her permission to stop trying to fix everything at once. Take one thing at a time. If sleep is the most valuable thing right now, start with sleep. Eat. Get outside. Move when you can. Give yourself grace. "If I don't take care of myself, I can't take care of my kids," she says. "It's not selfish to take care of yourself."

Then she started choosing things simply because she wanted them.

There was a hike to Francis Peak she had wanted to do for years and never had the time for. One free Saturday, no kids, no commitments, the kind of open day that once would have been crippling, she called a close friend and they climbed it. "I just remember getting to the top and thinking, this is amazing," she says. "I did this. I created this."

After that, a pattern. She saw an ad for the Utah Symphony's Messiah sing-along at Christmas and went alone, because she wanted to. She went to a movie by herself. She took a salsa dancing class, then went swing dancing, both of which were terrifying for a woman who had spent her life avoiding anything she might not be instantly good at. At forty-two, she went golfing for the first time. She was not good at it.

"But it was fun," she says. "I can do things that I'm not going to be good at, and it's going to be okay."

Somewhere in there, the sense that she did not matter began to loosen too. Kiri had spent most of her life in leadership roles, in school, in church, at work, and had never once felt she belonged in them. Impostor syndrome shadowed all of it. The shift came at a leadership course her employer sent her to, about a year and a half ago, when the presenter told the room that everyone in it mattered. Her reflex was to assume he meant everyone but her. This time, for the first time, she let it land. "You know what, he's right," she remembers thinking. "What I do matters. I can have an impact."

Ask her now what she is proudest of building, and she pauses before landing somewhere she did not expect to.

"My relationship with myself, honestly."

That is the thing underneath the hikes and the sing-alongs and the golf. A relationship in which she gives herself space to be imperfect, to feel what she feels, to try and fail and keep going. The proof surfaced just last week. A friend asked her, offhand, what simple pleasures she enjoyed, and Kiri reeled off fifteen or twenty without pausing: fireworks, hot tubs, cozy socks, candles, hot chocolate. The friend was stunned. "How did you do that? Most people couldn't do that." Only later did it hit Kiri how far she had come from the woman who once stared at a blank page and could not name one thing.

She is careful, still, about what this story is and is not. She does not want the divorce to be her identity, and she is clear that marriage still matters to her, is still something she wants and is working toward. But she is no longer waiting on it to be whole.

"It's a pivot moment. It's something you can learn and grow from, and through, and with. It doesn't have to define who you are. It's not who you are. It's just a part of my story."

For the woman who once could not spend a Saturday alone without flinching, that is the whole distance, traveled one deliberate choice at a time. And she wants anyone standing where she stood four years ago to hear the part she wishes someone had told her.

"Have hope. And work on trusting yourself. There's nothing special about me that's different from anybody else. You can rebuild from any kind of loss, any kind of change. You can go out there and change your world, which is really the most important one."





"Kiri is someone I can count on completely. She's the rare person I never have to follow up with or wonder whether she's doing what we agreed to. Years ago I stopped setting reminders to check on anything I'd handed her, because I know with certainty she'll either get it done or tell me the moment she hits a roadblock. That kind of reliability is hard to find and impossible to fake. She is easy to lead, and that's one of the highest compliments I know how to give." **– *Dave Olsen, Co-founder | CEO, nimbl***

Regina Lindo

Running Back to Twenty-One

A picky eater, a 5 a.m. alarm, and a 21-kilometer goal on the horizon. How one working mom made her own health non-negotiable.

When people meet Regina Lindo, 39, mother of two, the one answering work messages at 6 a.m. and coaxing malunggay into a picky eater's soup, they don't tend to picture a distance runner. But she is one. In 2016, before marriage and motherhood, she finished a 21-kilometer half marathon. Then last year, at 38, with her lower back aching and her elder sister newly diagnosed with diabetes, she started again, this time not to prove anything, but to last. "I just realized that I'm not getting any younger," she says. Now she's training toward October's 12K, with that half marathon somewhere back on the horizon.

Here is the thing most people miss about Regina's running. It isn't a hobby she squeezed in. It's a decision she made about what kind of mother she wants to be.

"It's not just like wanting to lose weight," she says. "It became about being healthy and present for my family."

The turn came gradually, then all at once. First it was the weight she felt she was carrying, and a lower back that started to hurt, then hurt more often as 40 crept closer. Then it was her sister's diabetes diagnosis, and the realization that it ran in the family. Somewhere in there, the math changed. Her kids are still young. They still need her a lot. She wants to see them grow up.

So she went back to the one thing she knew her body could do.

Getting the run into the day is its own quiet feat of engineering. Regina wakes at 5 a.m. to prepare food for her eldest before school. She logs in for work at six. At ten she cooks for her youngest, an early breakfast and lunch folded into one, then wakes her, helps her into her uniform and shoes, and hands off to her husband for the school run. She logs out around 2:30 or 3 to pick up the kids. Only then, on the way home, does the run happen. Her husband drops her two to three kilometers out, and she walks and jogs the rest, up to an hour, before mom duties resume: dinner, backpacks, the next school day.

"If I want to exercise to happen, I have to be intentional," she says.

None of it is frictionless. On the hard days, the interruptions come mid-momentum: a meeting, a deadline, and two kids with questions and requests that don't wait. She switches out of work mode, then has to climb back in and find her focus again. Time management stopped being a nice idea and became the whole architecture of her life.







It doesn't have to be perfect. That's the part she keeps returning to.

There have been busy stretches when the exercise got pushed aside entirely, a week here, a couple of days there. What she refuses to do is let a missed week curdle into quitting. If she can only steal thirty minutes once or twice, she takes it. What keeps pulling her back out the door is partly the evidence written on her own body. When she started, the neighbors noticed. They saw the weight come off. Some of them began pointing other mothers her way.

"She can finish five kilometers like that," she remembers people saying. "You need to go with her."

"As a mom, it's really a fulfillment for me."

Regina Lindo

That recognition rerouted something. The running stopped being only hers.

Her youngest was the first to join. It started during summer, when Philippine schools are out, and Regina asked, almost offhand, if she wanted to come walk. The little girl lit up. Then it became a question Regina heard every day: "Are you going to walk later, mom?" A one-off turned into an every-other-day ritual, one or two kilometers of the two of them together, away from screens, talking.

"It's like a bonding for both of us," she says.

Her husband is the reason any of it holds. There is no household help in their house, which means every time she trains, walks a route, or lines up for a race, someone has to have the kids. He does. He covers the registration fees when she signs up to run. He notices the changes and tells her so. And her health has quietly reshaped him too: she talked him into badminton on weekends, and now it's the whole family's game. The weekday jog stays mostly hers, sometimes with a child in tow. The badminton belongs to everyone.

The food shifted alongside the miles. She has cut sweets where she can and grown more mindful about what she eats, less about restriction than about paying attention. The proudest kitchen wins are small and specific. Tinola, the Filipino chicken soup with ginger and leafy greens, is a genuine victory in a house of fried-food fans, especially because her eldest, her pickiest eater, loves it and asks for extra malunggay. On busy days Regina can buy tinola from the carinderia down the road. Her daughter tells her she likes her mom's better.



"As a mom, it's really a fulfillment for me."

She is careful not to oversell any of this as balance achieved. Ask her directly and she says she's still trying, still getting there. Balance, to her, was never doing everything perfectly every day. It's a routine she can actually sustain, one that leaves room for her work, her family, and herself.

There is a reason she wants that on the record. Regina wants other working mothers to read her story and go easier on themselves.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," she says. "It's okay if your routine isn't perfect." Start small. Walk when you can. Move when you can. When you miss a day, start again. And ask yourself the question that reset everything for her: do I want to be there to see my kids grow up? For her the answer is yes, and that yes is the whole point.

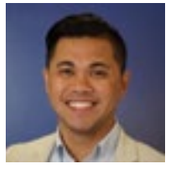
She jokes that mothers get called super moms, then adds the part that matters more to her: be kind to yourself, and don't feel guilty asking for help. Running is where she puts down what she's carrying.

"When I go for a run, I feel lighter," she says. "My mind feels cleaner."

The road ahead is measured in distances. The 12K is in October, and she's training for it now. If that goes well, 16 kilometers next year, and then, the year after, the number she keeps circling back to: 21 again. A second half marathon, at a different stage of life, with a different body and a different set of reasons than the woman who ran the first one in 2016.

That, more than any finish time, is what she's chasing.

"My body and my age change," she says. "But I can still set personal goals and accomplish them."



"Regina is one of those people who quietly makes everyone around her more successful. She's innovative, takes ownership of every project she touches, and is always looking for ways to improve how we work. Our operations team regularly relies on her to keep initiatives moving, and she consistently delivers." - ***Argel Sabillo, Founder and CEO, dtlaCPA & heyapril***



Lauren Marshall

Dogs for Good

Most people never guess she runs it. But Dogs for Good has grown from a quiet side hustle into the place her passion truly lives.

There is a sentence Lauren Marshall keeps returning to, half in disbelief. "I don't understand how people pay me to do this," she says. "I would just hang out with your dogs for free." Four years ago, newly settled in Oregon and suddenly home all day, she signed up on a pet-sitting app almost on a whim. What began as a few repeat clients has become Dogs for Good, a business she built entirely herself, one boarded dog at a time. She gives away ten percent of everything she earns to animal rescues. It is, she admits, more than she ever thought it would be, this quiet thing that grew and grew until it became unmistakably her own.

The app was supposed to be a small thing. A side hustle for a house that had gone quiet when her job went remote and she moved states in the same stretch of life.

Then people started reaching out. A few of them came back. Then a few more.

"It was just great, right out of the gate," she says.

She had spent her whole working life until then as someone else's employee. This was different. This was hers.

"I'm actually doing this for myself, earning money for myself, running my own little thing here," she says. "It was kind of empowering to be building something for myself."

The love of animals is older than the business by decades. Lauren was the kid outside turning over rocks for roly polies, worms, and snails, anything that moved. There was a small farm in the town where she grew up, and once a week her parents would take her to feed carrots to a camel named Lucy. Her brother worked alongside a wildlife rehabilitator, so birds of prey moved through the family's orbit. For a while, so did a possum who couldn't be released back into the wild and simply became theirs.

Dogs, though, are the ones who found the center of her.

"They're so sweet and loving and caring, and you have that connection to them," she says.

For years she ran everything through the app and didn't think of it as a business so much as a habit she got paid for. That changed last year, when she decided she wanted it to do some good beyond her own front door. She began donating ten percent of every dollar to animal rescue organizations. The name came from the same impulse.

"I'm hanging out with dogs, trying to do something good with it," she says. "That's pretty much it."

The organizations she chooses are never random. She follows dozens, and picks the ones that land somewhere personal. One is New York Bully Crew, which rescues pit bulls, a breed she says is badly misunderstood. Another is Project Street Vet, which runs veterinary clinics and hands out food so people without housing can care for their animals too.

The pull toward bully breeds is not abstract. Lauren's first dog was a pit bull, and he had a long life with her before he passed nearly a



THE SURPRISE ROUND

THINGS YOU'D NEVER GUESS

The side business most coworkers don't know about?
Dogs for Good, a pet-care business she runs herself.

Her honest take on getting paid for it?
"I would just hang out with your dogs for free."

What she did before accounting?
Years in education.

Where 10% of every dollar goes?
Animal rescues, including New York Bully Crew and Project Street Vet.

The unpaid employee?
Her 6'4" fiance, a magnet for the smallest dogs.

First dog, and future dog?
A pit bull. Someday, another.

One rule she'll never break?
"I don't want someone to ever think that their dog is just one of many."

decade ago.

Getting another has not been simple. For years she and her fiancé were renting, and a bully breed makes a rental almost impossible to find.

"There's still so much discrimination around that breed," she says.

They bought a house a couple of years ago, and now share it with two dogs, but the timing for a third hasn't been right yet. Someday, she's certain, there will be another pit bull.

"They're just giant babies and love bugs if you raise them right," she says. "A dog is a dog at the end of the day. It's all about how you treat them, how you raise them, how you train them."

Ask her about a dog she still thinks about, and one arrives immediately.

He was a blind Italian greyhound, brought over for daycare while his owner, a nurse, worked twelve-hour shifts. Lauren had never cared for a dog with special needs, and she went in braced for trouble. Would he bump into the walls? Manage the stairs? Spend the day frightened?

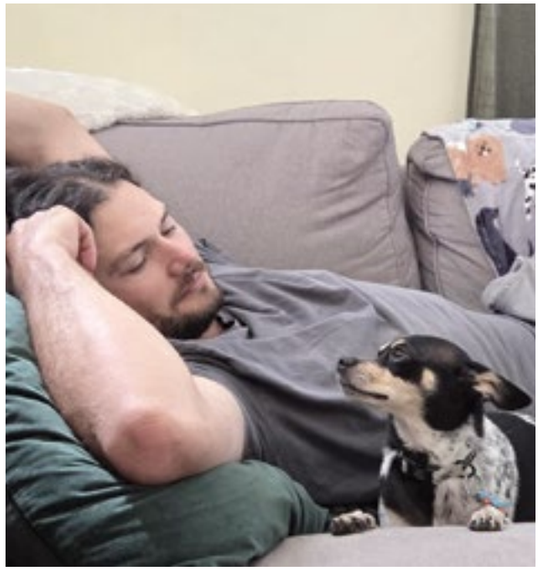
He did none of it.

"He immediately came in and mapped out the house and figured everything out and had no fear," she says. He would bump gently into one of her own dogs and be instantly ready to play. When her fiancé came home from work, the little greyhound would sniff him out and find him every time.

He passed away about a month ago, an old man by then, having lived a nice long life. She still speaks about him like someone she was lucky to know.

Her fiancé is what she jokingly calls the





unpaid employee of Dogs for Good. He feeds, he helps with the unglamorous parts, and he has become, without meaning to, the favorite of nearly every dog who passes through. He stands 6'4", and the smallest dogs are always the ones who climb straight into his lap.

"I took care of you all day," she says she tells them. "Where are my cuddles?"

The day-to-day is deliberately small for now. She boards just one dog at a time, since she has two of her own and a house with limits, and fills the rest of the week with drop-ins, quick loops around a small town where nothing is more than five minutes away.

The dream is bigger than the house can hold. She pictures a property with a barn, kennels built out and insulated against Oregon's long wet winters and its increasingly hot summers, room to take on more dogs and, eventually, help. What she will not give up, no matter how large it grows, is the feeling that brings people to her in the first place.

"I don't want to toss a dog in a kennel ever," she says. "I don't want someone to ever think that their dog is just one of many."

Lately, the two halves of her life have started to meet in the middle. At her firm, Devine Consulting, an initiative called Friends of the Flock has begun spotlighting rescue organizations and adoptable animals, an idea born from something the whole team shares. Her first love, quietly, becoming part of the work.

She spent years in education before she ever came to this. She notices the throughline.

"It went from taking care of people's kids to now taking care of people's dogs," she says.

If the business tells people anything about her, she hopes it's the simplest thing.

"Anybody that dedicates part of their life to any type of care, that shows the type of person they are," she says. "It warms my heart."



"Lauren has always shown up with integrity and loyalty to both me and the business. She has taken accountability for her role but also always thought of new ways to reinvent it. She has been a shining light in our customer experience and helped keep me organized and efficient in times of extreme chaos and overwhelm. She is everything people want when they hire an executive assistant or office manager, but few actually get." - ***Sam Hallburn, Director of Operations, Devine Consulting, LLC***

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Amy McCarty

The Quiet on the Other Side of Control

She looked like a woman in complete control. The story is about what it cost her, and what she found when she finally let go.



"I'm chasing something, and I don't know what it is yet." Amy McCarty said that out loud to her nutrition coach, and even as the words left her, some part of her already knew. She was in the best shape of her life, disciplined down to the gram, and somewhere along the way a thing that started from a good place had quietly taken over her whole mind. A mom of three, married twenty-one years, director of operations at an accounting firm, Amy looked entirely in control. Inside, the noise never stopped.

What she was chasing, it turned out, was something she already had.

This is the story of the morning she stopped chasing and started trusting God with the thing she had been holding most tightly.

It began, like a lot of these things do, somewhere good. She'd had three kids. She got back in shape. She loved the energy of it, the discipline, the way her body answered when she asked something of it. There was nothing wrong with any of the choices along the way. That is what made the line so hard to see.

"If I reflect back, it's such a small line," she says.

She can point to the exact moment she crossed it, though she didn't recognize it as a crossing until much later. It was that sentence to her coach, the one about chasing. She said it, felt something flicker, and kept going anyway. "Sometimes you ignore," she says. "I probably knew. And then I just kept going."

What she was chasing, she couldn't name. That was the whole problem.

Somewhere in there, the thing stopped being something she did and became someone she was. Her identity attached to it. She was Amy, and Amy was disciplined. Amy was in control of exactly what fuel went into her body and exactly how much she asked of it. If the weight came back, so did the fear that she'd lost her grip on who she was supposed to be.

"I couldn't put on any weight, because then I wasn't in control, and then I wasn't maintaining who I thought I was supposed to be."

The tell was the noise. She could be home with her husband and three kids and the animals, conversations happening all around her, and not really be there. "I'm hearing what they're saying, but I'm not actually hearing what they're saying." Underneath ran a quieter, colder current, a question about whether she was worthy, whether she was living up to whatever she thought she owed. Her journal entries from that stretch keep circling the same wish. I want to be more present today.

Amy had been journaling for years by then, seven or so. One day she sat down and tried to sort her whole life into categories she could track over time, and what she landed on surprised her. Every category came back to a relationship. Her relationship with herself. With her husband. With her kids. With work. And underneath all of them, the one she has come to believe holds the rest together, her relationship with God.

"If I focus there," she says, "everything else starts to



work better."

That was the thing she'd been getting backwards. She had wrapped her identity around health and fitness, and it could just as easily have been the career, or anything else. The danger was always the same. "If I tied my identity into my husband and I wasn't my own person, how can that marriage work?" You can't build a self out of a thing you're gripping.

Years earlier, a therapist had said something that stuck, precisely because she said it like it was nothing. Amy had mentioned struggling with body image for as long as she could remember, probably since she was a teenager. The therapist nodded and said everybody has something they struggle with.

"For me at that time, it was just, what? Other people? I thought this was me. I thought there was something wrong with me, that I was broken and I needed to fix it."

She wasn't broken. She was loved. It would take her a while to learn the difference, and longer to learn to live from it.

She didn't let go all at once. February was the big one, but it wasn't the first. She'd been quietly surrendering smaller things, the ones she hadn't wound her whole self around, working toward the one that would cost the most.

Leading up to that morning she had been praying on a single word.

Trust.

"Trust that God knew what I needed," she says, "and it wasn't me." It sat saved on her phone's lock screen, where she can still find it. Ask God first. Trust his answers more than your instincts. Because her instinct was always the same. Track. Measure. Make sure.

That morning she was in her home office, where she starts her days, and she understood that trusting God was going to require something that genuinely scared her. So she opened the app she used to log everything, the one that told her whether she'd hit her numbers for the day, and she canceled the subscription and deleted it off her phone.

The relief came first. Then the panic. "Oh my gosh, what did I just do?"

The app was never really the point. Deleting it was the visible edge of something quieter that had been happening underneath: she was handing the thing over, and the One she was handing it to was God. The freedom didn't come from an emptied phone. It came from letting go.

And nothing collapsed. She didn't spiral. The desire she'd braced for never showed up. When the pull to track again surfaced, she leaned on the tools and people around her to reinforce what she already knew. She'd done deeper work with a therapist and sometimes used an AI assistant as a practical reminder not to fall back into tracking. But the tools weren't the source of the change. They helped her live out a decision that had already begun with surrender.

By later that day, she noticed the thing she can't stop describing. Space.

"Holy cow. There's room up there."

The all-consuming hum had gone quiet, and into the quiet came a hunger she actually welcomed. "I just want to let go of everything," she remembers thinking. "Show me what else you can take, because I don't need it anymore."



What's left is not a life without discipline. She still works out. She still loves moving her body. What changed is the order of things, and what sits at the center of them.

For a long time, her quiet time, the journaling and the prayer, came after the workout, after the morning was already underway. Then people she trusted, a business group that folds faith into the work, kept telling her the same stubborn thing. Do the quiet time first. Roll out of bed and seek God before anything else. She had been asking them how surrender actually works, how you do it on an ordinary Tuesday, and the answer turned out to be almost insultingly small.

"You just do one thing."

So now she starts her day with quiet time with God, before the workout and the rest of the day. She held to it on vacation last week. She didn't stop exercising. She just stopped putting it first.

The marriage got the room, too. Twenty-one years in, she and her husband both know how easy it is to forget that your spouse is a whole separate person and not an extension of you, to assume that if you feel fine he must be fine over there. Clearing out the noise let her see him again, and choose him on purpose. It meant being more intentional about the small moments of connection and actually seeing each other. "We all can make a choice every day," she says. "I choose you and I choose this."

She names where she is now as living loved. It doesn't mean she finally earned something. It means she is learning to live from a love that was already there, God's love, the kind she didn't have to chase or maintain or prove. It means she can be in the room and actually be in it. It means she has stopped auditing her own worth.

"I now believe and trust that I'm here for a reason," she says. The purpose of any given day is just to show up for whoever is in front of her, her kids, her husband, coworkers, clients, and ask what they need.

She is still learning to say all of this out loud. For the last year she has felt a repeated prompting to tell her story, and she has written those exact words in her journal at least ten times without knowing which story she meant. She is starting to think this is it, and that she is learning to tell it while she is still living it.

If you're in the chasing part right now, still gripping hard, she has one thing she wants you to hear.

"If you're chasing something and you don't know what it is, you aren't chasing the right thing."



"Amy doesn't just make things run smoother, she makes sure the people around her better along with the process. When she streamlines a workflow, she doesn't stop there; she takes the time to train the team members on it, so the improvement sticks with the team, not just the system. That same instinct shows up outside DBA's walls too: she coaches other accounting firm owners and shares the resources that help them grow. It's a quiet kind of generosity, the kind that shows up in her time and attention long before it shows up in any title. Titles describe a role. What Amy does describes a person who genuinely wants everyone around her, inside and outside the firm, to do better." – ***Marcus Dillon, CPA, President, Client CFO | Dillon Business Advisors, Co-Founder, President | Collective by DBA***

Whitney McLaughlin

Middle of Nowhere, Center of Everything

She lives among predators, an hour from the nearest grocery store, and swears she has never been happier. This is how she got there.



Some nights, Whitney McLaughlin stops her car in the middle of the road, kills the engine, and looks up. The sky out here goes so dark and so deep that she has never seen anything like it. Whitney lives on a ten-thousand-acre wild-animal sanctuary in the remote Colorado plains, where lions, tigers, wolves, and bears roam enclosures that stretch a hundred acres apiece, and where a herd of wild horses grazes at her back door. She can hear the wolves howl from her house. She can hear the lions roar from miles off. "When I hear them roar from that distance, those are the moments where I pinch myself," she says. She moved here in February. It still does not feel real.

For most of her life, the view was very different. Whitney grew up in Los Angeles and stayed in big cities, fast-paced and full, for as long as she can remember. What never changed, city to city, was the pull toward animals.

She was the kid who wanted a dog before her mom was ready for one. The day she moved out, around eighteen, she got all three of her pets at once and kept them for the next fourteen or fifteen years. She grew up riding horses. Somewhere in there, a friend started comparing her to a Barbie game they used to play as girls, the one where you lived on a prairie surrounded by horses.

"Every little girl wants to live with the wild horses," Whitney says.

The move began, as these things often do, with a single question. She was living in Las Vegas, working remotely for an accounting firm, and not in love with the city. Her boyfriend, Clint, was in a job he did not love either. One night she asked him what he would do if he could do anything at all.

His answer was already there, waiting. The happiest he had ever been was moving animals. It had started as a side project with his stepdad, hauling elephants and hippos and rhinos, work that once meant coordinating a shipment out of a shuttered Puerto Rico zoo after a hurricane. Along the way he had worked with the man who founded the sanctuary, and loved it.

"Just call him," Whitney told him. "Put your name in the ring."

He did. That was July. Nothing came of it, until December, when the phone rang with an offer: director of a facility in a very small Colorado town, so remote that Clint should probably come see it before deciding.

Clint went alone, on the worst storm of the year. It was around one degree outside and he was freezing, and he still called to say he wanted it.

"Are you sure?" he asked her.

"I'll go get boxes right now," she said.

By February they had driven from Vegas to Colorado. Her family thought it was a little wild. They were not exactly surprised. This was, after all, the woman who had waited her whole life for something like this.

She did have one condition, and it mattered to her more than anything else.

She wanted to be sure these were the good guys. Whitney had seen the documentaries, the operations that call themselves sanctuaries while running something closer to a zoo, the





people keeping big cats as pets. She did not want to be part of that. What she found instead was ten thousand acres, enclosures averaging a hundred acres, animals given as close to a wild life as they will ever have again. Most cannot be released. This is the next best thing.

"In a perfect world, I think we'd go out of business," she says. As long as there are animals stranded in closed zoos, or nowhere else to go, there is a reason for a place like this to exist.

The animals here are mostly predators, lions and tigers and wolves and bears, alongside alpacas, yaks, donkeys, and somewhere around a hundred and thirty or forty wild horses. It is a no-contact facility. Nobody touches them.

That does not stop them from having personalities.

Many arrived from circuses and roadside attractions, used to people, and they can seem almost sweet, like they might want a belly rub. Then there is the pride Whitney describes as the closest thing to wild. At feeding time, each one gets its portion at the same moment, a routine the staff keep to so mealtime stays smooth, especially when there are medications to give. Up close, their roar rattles your bones.

Her sisters cannot understand how she sleeps at night. Her family thinks the fences look too thin. Whitney has never once felt unsafe.

What she feels, mostly, is lucky. Her days still look a lot like anyone else's who works from home. She keeps East Coast hours for the accounting firm, starting around six or seven, wrapping up mid-afternoon when she can. The difference is what happens on her breaks.

Clint is out on the property all day, helping with feeding and medications, jumping in wherever the operation needs him. When something good is happening, he calls, and she runs out to see it. When she needs air, she drives the grounds with her camera and shoots photos for the sanctuary's website, a volunteer project she has quietly made her own.

The photography surprised her most of all. She took a class in college and it never grabbed her. Urban Los Angeles gave her nothing she wanted to capture. Out here, the subject changed everything. Clint teases her for how often she catches the big cats mid-yawn. She likes the horses in motion, running. She will take a hundred frames and keep the ten she loves, sometimes just the one.

One of those single frames, a shot of the wild horses, has been her phone's screensaver for months.

Then there are the nights that arrive unscripted. Not long ago, a call came in from Parks and Wildlife. It has been a dry season, and mother bears have been abandoning cubs. One had been found on a nearby ranch, bound for a rehab facility, but no one could make the drive that night.

Would they babysit?

"What a dream," Whitney remembers thinking. The cub stayed the night.

For all the distance, the hardest part is smaller than you would expect: the hour-long drive to a grocery store. She has become resourceful, cooking from the pantry when she cannot face the trip. What she did not expect was the community.

In six months here, she has found better friendships than she managed in all her time in Vegas. For her recent birthday, people she had known only a few months threw her a party at the local bar, banners and balloons up, everyone bringing a dish. On her second trip to the grocery store, the staff already knew her name. At the post office, the town's teenage pageant winner walks in wearing her crown and thanks people for their service.

"It's like living in a Hallmark movie, but it's real life," she says.

There is talk, sometimes, of buying a house in town. Even then, they would keep coming back, one or two nights a week, so she could stay out here and shoot. She is not ready to let it go. Clint loves the work and its purpose, especially the rescue and transport side, and neither of them has any plans to change course.

She likes, too, that the sanctuary is his. She could work for the organization if she wanted. Instead she gets the part she loves most.

"I get to play," she says.

For someone who has carried anxiety most of her life, the quiet has done something she is still learning to name.

"I've never been happier," Whitney says. "I felt this weight lift off when we moved here." Between the animals and the community she found waiting for her, in the last place anyone would think to look, her heart is full.



HER WORDS

“When I hear them roar from that distance, those are the moments where I pinch myself.”

“Just call him. I’ll go get boxes right now.”

“In a perfect world, I think we’d go out of business.”

“It’s like living in a Hallmark movie, but it’s real life.”

“I get to play.”

“I’ve never been happier. I felt this weight lift off when we moved here.”



“From the first day I met Whitney, I knew she was a superstar. Dependable is an understatement when it comes to her work ethic. She answers the bell every time, no matter the situation. Her dedication and genuine care for her teammates and clients is rare in this industry. I’m so proud of what she’s built and where she’s gone, and it’s been incredible watching her bring that same star quality to her new team at BNA!” - ***Ashley Rhoden, COO, High Rock Accounting***

Ryan Osbahr

Solo to São Paulo

How a solo trip to Brazil taught Ryan Osbahr to get comfortable being uncomfortable.

PHOTO COURTESY OF Ryan Osbahr

When his friends backed out one by one, Ryan Osbahr made a decision that surprised even him. "I already put in so much time. I was mentally prepared to go. I'm buying this ticket. If you guys don't come, I'm still going anyway." So he did. Ryan flew to Brazil by himself, for a music festival, in a country where he didn't speak the language and had never once set foot. It was the first time he'd ever left the U.S. Two weeks later he came home with $2 Uber stories, a friend he still texts, and something he hadn't packed for. "If I had to say one thing," he says, "I'd say confidence."

The plan, at first, was never solo. There was a group chat. There were plans. Everyone was in.

"Everyone was so excited. This is going to be awesome," he remembers. Then, a week or two before the tickets had to be bought, the yeses started thinning out. One friend got cold feet. Another couldn't pull the money together. His best friend had a wedding to attend. One by one, every name dropped off, until the trip he'd been researching for weeks had exactly one traveler left.

He can't fully say why this festival, of all things, was worth crossing an ocean for alone. "It's a very big music festival. It's worldwide. People from all over travel to see it," he says. That was enough. He'd done the research. He'd let himself get excited. "I was at a point where I couldn't turn back."

He booked it, and kept it light in his head, right up until the plane. "It didn't really set in until I left. Leading up to it, I didn't think too much of it."

Brazil made up the difference fast.

He knew most people wouldn't speak English. What he hadn't braced for was that nothing else would either. Not the signs. Not the menus. "It was surreal. It was a lot, and I had to adjust very quickly," he says. "The language barrier was tougher than I thought it would be." A quick search before the trip had told him what he was walking into: more than 90 percent of the people around him wouldn't speak his language.

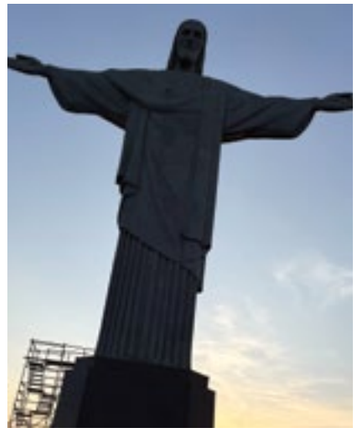
So he improvised. He'd taught himself a little Portuguese before leaving, "first-grade level stuff, just the basics." Google Translate became, in his words, one of his best friends. But he didn't want to hide behind a screen for every exchange. It felt impersonal. So he did the human thing instead.

"I was almost playing charades with the locals," he says. "They were loving it. They were having a blast with it too."

That is the part of Brazil that stuck with him hardest. Not the festival. The people.

"Every single stranger I met was so nice and welcoming," he says. "It was eye-opening. I've never met people like that in the US." He grew up about 30 minutes outside New York, where a stranger on the street is more likely to wave you off than help. In Brazil, people who couldn't understand a word he was saying stopped what they were doing to try. "They were more than happy to help me."

The festival itself was enormous. Three days, Friday to Sunday, in São Paulo. Five or six stages running at once. Tens of thousands of people, all there for the same reason.



"The vibes were great. Everyone was having a great time," he says. "It was a little overwhelming. There was so much going on." He'd come for a short list of acts. Alesso and Hardwell were at the top of it. They did not disappoint.

And somewhere in that crowd of thousands, he found the one person whose story mirrored his

THE TRIP, BY THE NUMBERS

ONE PASSENGER, TWO WEEKS, NO PLAN B

0	friends who came along
1st	time ever leaving the U.S.
2	weeks on the ground
1	Portuguese phrase memorized: “Do you speak English?”
90%+	of locals who didn’t speak his language
5-6	festival stages running at once
$2	a ride, tip included
$40	all-in for an hours-long steakhouse feast
20	seats on the rusted plane to Rio





own. Another traveler who had flown to Brazil by himself, just for the festival. They hung out for days. They still talk. The friend is planning a trip to the U.S. later this year, into New York, and Ryan already knows he'll go up to see him.

He didn't spend the two weeks playing it safe. On his second or third day, before he could talk himself out of it, he went hang gliding, strapped to an instructor who didn't speak English, against the advice of friends back home.

"They said, you probably shouldn't do that, it's not safe," he recalls. He did it anyway, early, on purpose. "I wanted to get it out of the way so I didn't have time to talk myself out of it." The drive up the hill was where his nerve wavered. "That was the point where I started to doubt myself a little." Then he ran off the edge, and the doubt went with him. "It didn't set in that I was jumping off a cliff until we were already flying."

Landing changed something.

"If I can jump off a cliff, the rest of this, Google Translate, navigating, walking around, talking to strangers, that's going to be no problem."

Not everything was thrilling by choice. A tiny 20-seater from São Paulo to Rio, old and rusted, had him convinced he might never reach the ground where he meant to. "There was a part of me that thought I wasn't getting there," he says. "There was nothing I could do about it. It was out of my control. I tried to relax and wait it out."

For all of it, he says he loved every part of the trip. There was only one thing he'd have changed.

"As cool as it is to experience, I had to come home and people would ask me about it. There's no one I could relive those memories with." He'd shared a steakhouse table with people he met at the festival, the kind of night where the meal ran for hours and cost about $40 a head with everything included. But those were new friends, scattered now across the world. The people who knew him best had stayed home.

That ache is also the thing that reframed the whole trip.

"You have to step up and adapt," he says. "There's no one else you can rely on. It pushed me out of my comfort zone." What he brought back wasn't a souvenir. It was a habit. "I got comfortable being uncomfortable."

He's tested it since. Last year, when a DJ he wanted to see was playing the Sphere in Las Vegas and nobody else seemed interested, he didn't wait around. He remembered Brazil, and he booked it himself.

His advice for anyone eyeing a solo trip is short. "Don't overthink it. Get out of your own head. Look at the positives, and everything works itself out."

There's a coda he almost forgot to mention. The same festival is happening again at the end of April, and this time, the friends who bailed are the ones asking to go. His stories did that.

"They said, wait, now we have to go," he says. "It's actually going to be the trip I was expecting it to be a couple years back."

He's already thinking of it as an experiment. Same festival, same country, different cast. "It's apples to apples now. I can see if I like the solo trip better, or the group trip. It's the perfect comparison."

Either way, he knows the version of himself who will show up this time. It's the one who bought the ticket when no one else would.



“Ryan Osbahr started with us as an intern while he was still a highschool student, and I’ve had the opportunity to watch him grow into one of the most important people in our firm. What stands out most isn’t just how much he’s learned, but how much ownership he now takes in making the entire firm better. He’s constantly looking for ways to improve our systems, help the team, and solve problems rather than just complete what’s assigned to him. Watching him grow from a young intern into a leader and manager we rely on every day has been one of the most rewarding parts of building our firm.” – ***Nick Boscia, Managing Partner, Boscia & Boscia PC***



Catherine Owen

Three Weeks in the Bush

Long before she was a mother of three, Catherine Owen spent three weeks in the Zambian bush, camped in tents and walking to villages most outsiders never reach. What she carried home wasn't the hardship. It was the perspective.

Catherine Owen keeps a memory she can summon by smell. Exhaust, woodsmoke, the char of a bonfire, and she is back in the Zambian bush, sitting just outside a circle of villagers who had gathered to sing. There were no instruments, only voices, harmonizing in a language she couldn't follow, under a sky so crowded with stars she says it looked lit from within. "You would think that there were instruments playing," she says, "but there were no instruments." Long before she was a mother of three tracking the behind-the-scenes work of a firm, Catherine was a college student who chose, deliberately, the hardest way in: hours past the last city, camped in tents, walking to villages most outsiders never reach.

Ask her what people would be surprised to learn about her, and this is what she reaches for. Not the everyday. A trip she took years ago, to a place she had to work to get to.

She went to a Christian college, and the trip started with a sense of calling. What pulled her specifically to Zambia was what she'd learned about how remote the country's interior really is. In villages far from any hospital, people had no reliable access to care. When someone fell sick, and malaria and other disease were common, they often turned to witch doctors. Catherine wanted to go where help rarely arrived.

"I wanted to reach the people who people forget about," she says.

It was her first trip, and she decided to go all the way in. No half measures. If she was going to do it, she was going to camp, rough it, and get all the way out to the people others didn't reach. Her friends thought she was crazy. "Cathy, you don't have to go," she remembers them saying. "It's gonna be rough." She felt too strongly about it to stay home.

Getting there meant driving hours into the bush, away from the main city, then setting up camp with tents and walking, sometimes an hour or more, to reach the small villages beyond.

The first day, she felt out of her element. She was traveling with other college students she'd met before but didn't know well, cut off from her boyfriend and family, without a phone or internet. The terrain was dry and barren, thick with dust, nothing like anywhere she'd been. Then they reached the first village, and everything shifted.

The people had gathered to meet them. As the group rolled in on the back of a work truck, villagers pressed in to shake their hands and hug them, welcoming a busload of strangers who had come all the way out to the middle of nowhere. "They just were hugging us and shaking our hands," she says. That welcome set the tone for everything that followed.

The warmth kept surprising her. In one village, a woman was so glad they'd come that she handed Catherine her newborn, a baby she guesses was no more than two months old, and stepped away.

In America, Catherine points out, you don't just hand your child to a stranger.

There were moments she still struggles to fully explain.







She describes praying with families and seeing things she can only call miracles, including a young girl, around three years old, whose eyes had been shut and who, after they prayed, was able to open them. For parents who had known only the witch doctor, she says, that kind of hope landed as something real and restorative.

The work itself was concrete. In one village, a crew drilled a water hole so people would no longer have to walk miles to a pond of dirty standing water. While the professionals ran the big drill, Catherine and the others kept the children occupied, playing games and telling Bible stories as they waited. She doesn't remember a dramatic scene of villagers rushing the finished well. What she remembers is the waiting, the kids, and the plain knowledge of what the water would mean for people she'd watched living without it.

The living was as rough as promised, though not in the way outsiders assume. They showered by pouring collected bottled water into a basin about half the size of a bathtub and taking turns, women in one, men in another, sharing what water there was.

One moment she refused. When some of the men set about slaughtering a chicken for a meal, the way food is handled out there, she couldn't watch. She remembers walking away, back to the truck, to sit it out. "I don't want to see any of that," she says. Other firsts she leaned into. She ate goat, and plenty of nshima, a thick cornmeal staple pounded into a scoopable consistency, used to pick up meat and sauce by hand.

If there was a single moment that reset her sense of what she needed, it came in a village with two women and a few young children. The men were away, likely working. The families lived in handmade huts built from large sticks, nothing manufactured, nothing a carpenter would recognize. They had almost nothing. And they insisted on giving Catherine's group a large watermelon, along with something else she can't quite recall, another fruit maybe, simply out of gratitude for the visit.

On the long walk back, Catherine ran out of water and grew dehydrated. The leader with them that day cracked open that same watermelon so she could have some. It got her back to camp.

"We don't need all the things that we have," she says, "and our problems here are so different than what they experience."

Coming home was its own kind of shock. She went straight into an internship in Florida, staying with a host family in a comfortable house with a pool and every convenience. The jump from dust and tents to all of it unsettled her. She found she couldn't even look at her closet the same way. Where she'd once told herself she needed more, she now stood in front of her clothes wondering why she had so much.

What stayed with her went deeper than any comparison of possessions. "At the end of the day, they're people," she says of the villagers she met. "We were able to connect with them on such a deep level, and really bring change. But they changed us just the same."

She's held onto the connection deliberately. Not long after the trip, she and her family began sponsoring a girl through Compassion International, a child in Burkina Faso, exchanging letters and helping cover her schooling and food. For years afterward, Catherine stayed involved with youth and spoke in churches about what she'd seen, wanting the American church to feel the shift in perspective she'd felt.

These days her ministry looks different. It looks like three kids, ages three, five, and eight, and the daily work of raising them well.

That work is harder than any of it. She wants her children to understand that a life isn't the sum of what you own, a lesson she admits is tough to teach an eight-year-old shaped by everything she sees on YouTube. So Catherine shows them the pictures. She tells them what she got to do. She volunteers alongside them when she can, hoping they'll one day feel it for themselves.

Would she want them to go one day? For sure, she says, even knowing how hard it would be to send them so far. She'd want them to have what she had: a fresh look at how differently people can live, and how much they can still share across it.

Would she go back? She would, given the right timing and the right organization. Only next time, she says, she wouldn't want to go alone with a story to bring home. She'd want to bring her husband, and the people close to her who only ever heard about it, so they could see it too.

FIELD NOTES

THREE WEEKS IN THE BUSH

The moments that stayed with her, out of order and unfiltered

01 The smell that brings it back: exhaust, woodsmoke, bonfire char, and a sky that looked lit from within.

02 Villagers rushing the truck to hug and shake hands with strangers who'd come all the way to the middle of nowhere.

03 A mother handing over her newborn, guessed at no more than two months old, and stepping away.

04 Games and Bible stories with the kids while the crew drilled the village's first water hole.

05 Walking away rather than watch a chicken slaughtered for the meal.

06 Her first taste of goat and nshima, eaten by hand.

07 Two women with almost nothing, insisting she take a watermelon out of gratitude.

08 That same watermelon, cracked open to revive her on the walk back, dehydrated.

09 Home again, staring at a closet she no longer recognized.



"Catherine is our accountability bandit. She is really good at making sure things don't get missed. She catches the details, ensures deadlines are met, and holds people to the expectations we've agreed to. She has a way of keeping things moving forward and making sure we actually accomplish the goals we've set as an organization. A lot of what Catherine brings to the team isn't going to show up in a job description, but it makes a huge difference in how well we execute." **– *Dan Luthi, COO / Partner, Ignite Spot***

Todd Robinson

The Blessing He Couldn't Keep to Himself

Adopted as an infant in 1970, Todd Robinson learned early that a life can turn on a single phone call. Decades later, he answered one of his own.

There is a piece of paper somewhere in Todd Robinson's house, filled out in his father's handwriting: baby born, date, time, weight. It is the record of the day, in the late summer of 1970, that a couple raced to Columbus, Ohio, wholly unprepared, to bring home a child who was not biologically theirs. That first night, with no crib, they pulled a drawer from the dresser, lined it with a blanket, and laid him inside. More than forty years later, Todd would answer a phone call of his own and drive to a hospital in Detroit to meet a son. He has spent a lifetime turning the circumstances of his beginning into a single guiding belief: that every day he is here at all is a blessing worth passing on.

He does not treat that as a figure of speech. "Had certain things not happened in the chronological order, I would not be standing here right now," Todd says. He means it literally. The marriage, the children, the house in New Jersey, the whole shape of his fifty-plus years all trace back to a decision made by a woman he has never met, and to a couple in Ohio who drove down to collect him with nothing ready at home.

Todd was born in August of 1970, into what was then a closed adoption. His parents adopted a daughter too, two years younger, and they never hid the truth from either child. He knew he was adopted almost as early as he could understand the word. The irony was not lost on him growing up, when people kept telling him how much he resembled his father.

"You're looking more and more like your old man," they would say.

He wasn't, of course. Not by blood. But he had spent every day of his life beside the man, and that closeness did its own quiet work.

The details his parents kept became a kind of family folklore. The dresser drawer that served as his first crib. A wax candle shaped like an apple that, as a baby, he bit into thinking it was real, pressing the marks of his first two teeth into the surface. Small artifacts of a beginning that could just as easily never have happened.

That awareness, that his whole life rested on a





THE ECHO

CHOSEN, THEN CHOOSING

Two calls, forty years apart, that asked him to become the parents who raced in for him

1970 - COLUMBUS, OHIO
A couple raced in, wholly unprepared, to bring home a child who was not biologically theirs.

That first night, with no crib, they pulled a drawer from the dresser, lined it with a blanket, and laid him inside.

"Had certain things not happened in the chronological order, I would not be standing here right now."

2011 - DETROIT, MICHIGAN
A young couple had chosen them. He met his son, and both birth parents, in the same hospital room.

Two weeks later, still catching his breath from all of it, he brought his son home for good.

"We wanted to reassure them that their baby was in good hands."

Someone chose him. He chose Jaylin.

single yes, settled into him as gratitude rather than grief.

"My glass is always half full, not half empty," he says. He divides the world into givers, takers, and equalizers, and counts himself firmly among the first. "I'm a giver in life."

Still, one question has never closed.

Around 2010, when Ohio unsealed its older adoption records, Todd requested his. He hoped, quietly, that the papers might help him find the woman who gave birth to him. What arrived instead confirmed that she was aware of the change too, and had chosen to remain anonymous. She did, however, take the time to pass along his medical history and something of his heritage.

He opened the envelope expecting an answer. He got a boundary and a small act of care at the same time.

"There's always been a piece of me that feels like something's missing," Todd says. "I just want to know who she is."

Sixteen years later, he still has not gone looking. He knows he probably could. He also knows the risk that she may no longer be alive, that some doors close on their own.

"That was an exciting day and a sad day for me, all in one," he says.

It would have been easy for that ache to curdle. Instead, it pointed him somewhere.

Todd and his wife, Katie, had their daughter, Holly, almost immediately after marrying. When a second biological child did not come, adoption felt, to Todd especially, less like a fallback than a homecoming.

"Katie was very open to it," he says. "Primarily because I was adopted."

In 2011, the call came. A young couple in Detroit had chosen them. Todd was forty, near the top of his sales career, scheduled that very week to leave for a trip he had earned three years running.

> *"You're looking more and more like your old man," they would say.*
>
> ***Todd Robinson***

He met his son first. He held him. He met both birth parents in the hospital, an intimacy most adoptive parents never get.

"We wanted to reassure them that their baby was in good hands," he says.

Then, still catching his breath from all of it, he flew to Cabo San Lucas for the trip, came home, and two weeks later brought his son home for good.

They named him Jaylin Joseph Robinson, keeping the first name his birth parents had given him and adding a middle name from Katie's side. Keeping it was never in question.

"It felt natural," Todd says.

The connection to Jaylin's first family has stayed open by design. A photograph of his birth mother sits on his dresser. Katie exchanges emails with her, more often around holidays and birthdays. Todd hopes that one day, when the timing is right, Jaylin will read those messages himself and understand exactly how much he was loved before he ever arrived.

The birth parents were about twenty when Jaylin was born. They are still together. They married, and they have since had another child, which means somewhere out there Jaylin has a younger brother of his own. To Todd, none of that reads as loss. It reads as two people who wanted to give their child a life they could not yet provide, and who trusted him to provide it.

That is the whole architecture of his gratitude. Someone chose him. He chose Jaylin. The blessing was never meant to stop with him.

He thinks about the future in the language of stewardship, not ownership. Holly, now twenty-four and finishing graduate school, will soon leave for good. Jaylin will follow in his own time.

"He's on loan to us," Todd says.

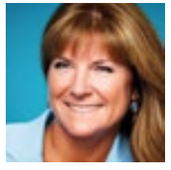
He says it without sadness. It is simply how he understands the job: to love them fully, raise them well, and let them go where they are meant to go.

"Wherever he wants to end up is his choice," Todd says. "He'll always have a part in our lives, no matter what."

He was a baby once, laid down to sleep in a dresser drawer by strangers who chose to keep him. Everything after that, the marriage, the children, the ordinary mornings at the mirror, has felt to him like interest paid on a gift he never earned.

So he keeps giving it away.





"What says more about Todd than his job title is the incredible depth of knowledge he has built around the CAS vendor ecosystem and, more importantly, how freely he shares it with others. When we're working with firms, Todd consistently brings the right insight, connections, and perspective to help them navigate the ever-changing landscape of technology and services. He never holds back his knowledge; he genuinely wants to help firms make better decisions and succeed. That combination of expertise and generosity is what makes Todd such a valuable partner and, more importantly, such a great person to work alongside."
- Deborah Defer, Director of CAS Consulting, Woodard



Adeline Rodriguez

The Cost of Doing It All Herself

For years she thought workplace harassment was just part of showing up. This is how one young woman stopped getting used to it, and started standing up.

When Adeline Rodriguez turned eighteen, she wanted one thing: to be an adult, right now, on her own terms. So she got the apartment, got the jobs, and figured out the rest the hard way: credit scores, security deposits, utility accounts, none of it taught in school. "I have to take care of myself," she remembers thinking. "No one else is going to do that for me." What she didn't expect was how often that resolve would be tested by the men and managers around her. There was the coworker who chased her through the store. The boss who let it slide. For years, Adeline thought that was just how work went. "I got used to it," she says. "I thought it was normal." It wasn't. And learning that changed everything.

The independence itself was never in question. She had watched it modeled her whole life.

Her mother left college to be with Adeline's father, then went back years later, earning a bachelor's and then a master's while raising kids and teaching full-time. Eventually she became a principal. For a stretch, she was even Adeline's own teacher. "I just watched her my whole life," Adeline says. "I kinda wanted to strive like her." So when high school ended, Adeline moved fast. She moved out. She got her own place. And she found out exactly what independence costs when you are eighteen and paying for all of it alone.

It cost, among other things, dinner.

She ate the same meal almost every week, rationing what little there was. "I had to decide if I wanted to go out with friends, buy stuff that I needed, shampoo or body wash, or buy a nice meal I wanted." She figured it out. She always figured it out. That was the whole point.

What she could not figure out, because it was never hers to fix, was the thing that kept happening at work.

It started, in one job, with a seasonal colleague she barely knew. First came the late-night messages, flirtatious and unwanted, sent while he knew she was in a relationship. Then the intoxicated calls she declined. She reported it. Her manager's solution was to keep them on different shifts. He began showing up early, on days he wasn't working, just to be near her. She could tolerate the phone, she says, because at least there was evidence. In person was different.

In person was the day he chased her through the store.

"I was terrified to go to work," she remembers. "I always overthink and think the worst things, and that I did not think was gonna happen." When it did, she couldn't believe it was real. "I thought I was in a dream. I really did not think it was real until after crying and experiencing it." She ran to the back. She cried. She asked to leave, and they let her go, and that was all they did.

She never felt safe there again, so she left. But she carried something out of that store with her, a line drawn in her own mind. "That's never happening again. Ever. I will never let someone do that to me."

The next job brought a different kind of harassment, quieter and slower, but no less deliberate. At a job where she trained the manager who would later turn on her, the problem became her age. She was nineteen. The woman was nearly thirty. Adeline had trained her, and everyone knew it, and that seemed to be exactly the problem.

She recognized the pattern only in hindsight: not a firing, not honest feedback, but a slow campaign to make her want to leave. "If some-







one's not doing a good job, you can fire them, you can write them up and guide them," she says. "But pushing someone out like that, it's personal. It's not about what they do. It's about who they are."

She refused to sign the paper they put in front of her. She had the awards. She had the record. When she walked out, people were shocked to see her go. "My actions showed for it that I knew what I was doing."

Then there was the last job, where a group meeting collapsed into a coworker shouting down everyone in the room while the managers watching failed to stop it. Adeline was the youngest person there, and she was the one who spoke. This isn't working, she told them. Take everyone one on one. She left two weeks later.

Somewhere in all of this, she started keeping receipts.

It's the one lesson she went back to add after the fact, and maybe the most telling of all: she learned to document everything. In a stretch of jobs where being believed was never guaranteed, evidence became its own form of protection. It was the thing she could control when so much else was out of her hands.

Because for a long time, she believed almost none of it was in her control. She was naive, she says now, and she means it kindly toward her younger self. "I truly thought every person is good, no ill intentions." Job after job taught her otherwise. "Something always bad happened. Always." What finally shifted was not the workplaces. It was her. Somewhere in the retelling, hearing other people react with alarm to stories she'd long since filed under ordinary, she understood how much she had been absorbing without a word.



Ask her now how she would have handled it differently, and she goes straight back to the store.

"I would've been stronger and stood up for myself and didn't let anyone walk all over me or tell me, it's okay, just show up to your shift, you'll be fine." She pauses on the trust of it, the way she'd been asked to hand her safety to someone else's assurance. "I'm never gonna trust anyone to say I'm gonna be okay when I feel threatened or unsafe ever again."

These days she credits her faith for how things finally landed. A Christian, she believes she was being steered toward something the whole time. When the right job came, the one she now has, it felt less like luck than like alignment. "It just felt perfect," she says. She wanted security. She wanted the kind of job you keep. For the first time, she has a life that holds together on both sides of the workday. "I have time to actually live my life and be happy."

Independence, she'll tell you, means something different to her now. Married, she no longer measures it in doing it alone. "I'm no longer independent, I also depend on other people," she says. "But my independence is truly my actions, what I do, what I say. I can only control what I do."

If she could reach back to the eighteen-year-old who wanted to carry all of it by herself, the message would be gentler than the life she actually lived. "Take a breath, enjoy life, one thing at a time."

And to the woman reading this in a job that feels like the ones she survived, still telling herself it's normal, she has the thing she wishes someone had told her sooner.

"You're not alone, even though you are independent and you're your own self. You're not alone." Then, the part she had to learn the hardest way of all: "Stand up and say something."



"One of the things I admire most about Adeline Rodriguez is her willingness to figure things out. If she doesn't know how to do something, she doesn't shy away from it. She takes the initiative to learn, ask questions, and find a solution, often going above and beyond what was originally asked of her. What says the most about her is the pride she takes in helping our firm succeed and making life easier for everyone around her. Adeline may have the title of admin, but she has become someone I truly trust and rely on every single day." – ***Katie Helle, Principal Advisor, Scaled Accounting Solutions.***

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Victoria Rubi

She Would Not Let Grief Have the Last Word

Everyone calls her sensitive. What they miss is the strength it took to survive losing her mother, and the quiet, daily work of refusing to let grief have the final word.

People meet Victoria and decide quickly what she is. Soft. Sensitive. A little breakable. She does not entirely argue the point. But there is a strength they never see, one that surprised even her. It arrived in the worst season of her life, when her mother died at fifty-two with no warning, no illness, no time to brace for it. Seven years later, Victoria can name the thing grief tried to make her: anxious, full of self-doubt, always scanning the room for the nearest exit. She refused. "At the end of the day," she says, "you don't have a choice but to be strong." What looks like softness, it turns out, is the shape strength takes when it has been broken and chosen again.

Ask her when that strength first surprised her, and she does not reach for a triumph. She reaches for the hardest stretch of her life.

"I never imagined I could go through something so painful and still keep choosing to move forward every day."

That is the thing the people around her miss. They see the tenderness and stop there. They do not see what it costs to keep standing.

To understand the strength, you have to understand where it came from. And it came from her mother.

She was a stay-at-home mom, wholly devoted to Victoria and her brother, and the loveliest person Victoria can imagine. Strong, too, but not in a way that hardened her. "She was incredibly strong," Victoria says, "but she carried that strength with so much gentleness." That combination is the exact thing Victoria is still working to become. When she looks for her own resilience now, that is where she finds its source.

There is one memory that holds the whole of who her mother was. Victoria was about fifteen when her grandfather, her mother's own father, died. It was the first time she understood what it meant to lose someone, and she was heartbroken. What she remembers most, though, is not her own grief. It is her mother's hands on it.

"Even though it was her own father, and she was heartbroken as well, she was there for me. She took care of me."

Her mother was burying her own father and comforting her daughter in the same breath. Always putting others first. That, Victoria says, was her mother entirely.

The devotion showed up in smaller ways too, in the ordinary machinery of raising a child. Victoria walked into kindergarten already able to read, ahead of her classmates, because her mother had taught her at home. And when English lessons came, her mother, who did not speak English, taught herself first. She sat with dictionaries and encyclopedias so she could turn around and teach her daughter. Victoria has not forgotten a minute of it.

Then, seven years ago this month, her mother was simply gone.

There had been no sickness, no slow decline, nothing to prepare for. "It happened out of nowhere," Victoria says. "It was a surprise for





“It’s allowing yourself to break, feel everything, and still find a way to keep going.”

Victoria Rubi

everyone.” What has stayed with her most is how fast a life can change shape. One day everything is ordinary, and the next, she says, the wiring in your brain rearranges itself. Grief opened a dark space in her mind where everything felt uncertain, where she found herself looking for emergency exits everywhere, braced for the next catastrophe.

She knows that answer is not a comfortable one. She gave it anyway, on purpose.

“I wish I had an inspirational answer. But I want to be honest, because in case someone reading this is going through the same, they know they’re not alone in what they’re feeling.”

That honesty is the whole point for her. Grief, she has learned, does not stay a season. It settles in and becomes part of who you are, and the anxiety and self-doubt can settle in right alongside it. There was no single stretch when it tried to pull her under. It was quieter and more constant than that. So her answer had to be constant too.

She decided, consciously, that those feelings would not run her life. That decision meant being willing to ask for help. And it meant choosing, day by day, to work through them rather than around them.

The turning point was not a lightning strike. It was a sentence she read once, of all places, on TikTok: the best way to honor your mother is to take care of her daughter. It lodged in her and never left.

“If my mom were still here, I know she would do everything in her power to see me happy and living my best life. So that’s why I keep fighting. I try to do that for her.”

Doing something with the grief, rather than being flattened by it, has a concrete shape now. It means picking back up the dreams she had set down when everything felt hopeless. It means letting herself dream big again, because she is certain that is what her mother would want. On the days that certainty runs thin, she borrows it. She imagines what her mother would say, and she keeps moving.

She is careful not to dress this up as something it isn’t.

“I don’t want this to sound like toxic or fake positivity. I still have hard days. But having them doesn’t mean I’ve given up. I get through them, and I keep showing up every day.”

Even surrounded by people who love her, the grief stays lonely. Her brother lost the same mother, and still, Victoria says, their grief is not the same grief, because no two people had the same relationship with her. You can have someone beside you in it. No one will ever feel exactly what you feel. That, to her, is what makes loss so isolating, and it is exactly why she is willing to speak about hers out loud.

Seven years on, her mother is not so much gone as differently present. Victoria finds her everywhere: in every food she loved, in the jokes she used to tell, in a sky full of beautiful color, in the empathy Victoria feels toward other people. “She’s in so many little pieces of my everyday life that sometimes it feels like she never left.”



She asks her mother for signs. She has decided to believe every one of them.

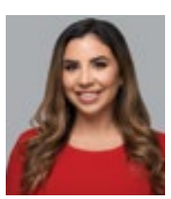
People have told her the signs are coincidence, that she sees what she wants to see. Victoria, who admits she usually cares a great deal what people think, has made this the one place she does not. “When it comes to this, I’ve decided to believe every sign. I truly believe my mom would do anything in her power to show me she’s here.” Her advice to anyone else grieving is the same. If a sign feels like it is for you, let it be. You do not owe anyone an explanation.

This is what resilience means to her now, and it is not what it meant before. Not being strong all the time. Something harder and more forgiving than that.

“It’s allowing yourself to break, feel everything, and still find a way to keep going.”

Looking ahead, she knows exactly who she wants to become. Not someone who got past this, but someone shaped by it: the best version of herself, carrying her mother’s love, her strength, her empathy, and every lesson she taught. And if her mother could see the woman she has become through all of it, Victoria believes she knows what she would hear.

“She’d say she’s proud of me. She’d tell me to keep being strong, and most of all, to keep my faith. She was a woman of deep faith. I know she’d want me to stay hopeful and believe that one day we’ll be together again.”



“Victoria consistently looks beyond her own role and asks how we can make the process better for the client and the team. She researches, suggests thoughtful improvements, considers how changes affect other departments, and pays close attention to the details. What stands out most is that she brings that level of care and innovation consistently, and she does it with a smile.” ***– Tiffany Gonzalez, CEO & Founder, Accounting to Scale***







Mary Elizabeth Warren

We All Contain Multitudes

She traded stadium lights for stability, but never gave back what the stage gave her. One woman on the many lives she carries at once.

At sixteen, Mary Elizabeth Warren stood on the field at Super Bowl XXXIV in Atlanta, dancing Proud Mary behind Tina Turner while a stadium roared. She calls it electric, a word she keeps returning to, decades later, from the far side of a career in accounting. Most people who know Mary Elizabeth now know only one of her: the numbers person who can lock in on a spreadsheet for twelve hours. Few know the girl who leapt across a dance studio at three because it "felt correct in my body," or the young woman who turned down Disney and national tours to build a life that would stay in one place. She contains, as she puts it, multitudes, and considers that her greatest asset.

That word, multitudes, is the one she reaches for when you ask what it is like to be all of these people at once. The performer. The stay-at-home mom she was for seven years. The accountant she is now. Different groups of people know her as different things, and for a long time those worlds sat apart from one another.

She has stopped experiencing that as a contradiction.

"Everyone contains multitudes," she says. "Nobody is so two dimensional. It feels correct to be a whole, three dimensional person with all of these life experiences that make life richer."

The stage came first, and it came early. She was three years old, sitting in a circle in a dance class, when she got up and leapt across the floor. She still remembers the pleasure of it.

"It felt correct in my body," she says. "It was never not a good time. It always felt right."

She danced competitively as a child, then began booking professional work through her middle and high school years. Atlanta, mostly, and later two separate chapters in Virginia.



"It's a job. It's a job," she says, of caretaking.

Mary Elizabeth Warren

The Super Bowl gig was the one that told her, even at sixteen, that she had wandered into something big. She was one of hundreds of dancers, "me and four hundred of my closest friends," she jokes, but she knew what it meant to share a field with Tina Turner. Performing in a stadium was nothing like performing on a stage, even a large one. It satisfied something specific in her, a competitive streak and a certain brand of perfectionism she has since recognized in high performers of every kind. Getting the gig was rewarding on its own. Getting to perform it was the icing on the cake.

College was the logical next step, though logical is a generous word for a choice between theater and dance when you also love to sing. She and her family had poured years and resources into developing her as a performer. It was either major in it or turn professional straightaway, and she was not quite ready to leave the nest.

So she went.

Fine arts majors, she argues, do not get enough credit for how much they carry. Up at eight in the morning, four days a week, in pink tights for an hour and a half of ballet, then coursework, then rehearsals at night. The rigor was relentless. But the thing those years in Gainesville gave her that she still leans on hardest was permission to take up space. Being an employable performer, she says, demands that you command a room without apology, in the full confidence that you deserve to. For a teenager coming of age when the media was particularly cruel and misogynistic, that was no small thing to learn.

By her senior year she was landing featured roles, and with them came pressure, visibility, expectation. She auditioned over a Christmas



break, booked the job, and left school a month early to take it, straddling the academic world and the professional one before either had fully released her. This was 2006, long before remote classes made that kind of thing ordinary.

Then the offers kept coming, and the deciding began. Or rather, the not-deciding.

A cruise line. A national tour. Disney, which wanted her as a villain, though she had wanted to be a princess and was too tall at five foot nine. Each call posed the same question. Was she willing to uproot her life, move for six or nine months, and land back at square one when the contract ended? The answer kept coming back no.

"I decided by not deciding," she says.

By about twenty-five, the offers had stopped, and she had let the door close.

Ask what leaving cost her and she does not hesitate. It was the electricity. The euphoria of eight shows a week, the thrill of an ensemble, the power of watching an audience receive what you are giving them. Collective effervescence.

"The kinds of shows I was primed for were light and fluffy entertainment. Nothing that was changing peoples' lives, but so fun! For me, there's so much more to life than that, than applause and spotlights," she says, and yet she misses it.

What she got in exchange was harder to see but, she insists, invaluable. Stability, and proof that she had worth beyond the things about her that were marketable, her dance skills, her singing, the way she looked at the time. Building a self that could stand on its own two feet, that could speak without a script and be herself in a way that was not performative, gave her a depth she was not sure the stage alone would have.

The years that followed humbled her further. She taught dance, married the man she had been dating through the in-between, had a daughter a year later, and stayed home for seven years. She had thought she understood work. She learned that caring for a small person, like caring for an elderly one, is labor, and badly underappreciated labor at that. The aloneness built a mental toughness she had not needed onstage.

"It's a job. It's a job," she says, of caretaking.

What she carried through all of it was a conviction about why any of it mattered. Being allowed to pursue artistic passions as a child, she believes, is the reason her brain is her asset. Theater is storytelling, and storytelling builds empathy. Dance does something quieter, and something she suspected for years was real. She recently found the study that confirmed it, work published on dance and neuroplasticity.

"That's it, like bingo," she says.

She had always sensed there was something particular about dancers and the way they move through the world. Now she has the word for it. Dance trains the brain to adapt, to learn through experience, to stay flexible under pressure. And in the current climate, she considers the ability to absorb new information, assess it critically, and change your mind when a better idea comes along to be about the most valuable skill there is. In a moment when the cultural advice runs toward skip college and learn to code, she is making a different case entirely. An artistic upbringing, she says, builds an understanding of how much work a finished product takes. It builds critical thinkers. Team players.

She is watching that conviction play out one row back now. Her fourteen-year-old daughter is a competitive dancer, sometimes on the very same competition circuits Mary Elizabeth once traveled. Being on this side of it is wild, she says, and full of pride, because she knows exactly what went into every routine.

What moves her most is watching her daughter take up space the same way she once learned to, unapologetically, sharing her art in front of a room full of strangers without hesitation. That tenacity, that willingness to be emotionally open in public, is exactly what she thinks arts education gives kids, and adults, that a classroom or a professional certification cannot.

"When we give kids room to feel things out loud, we're raising adults with more empathy," she says. A small way, she calls it, to make the world a little kinder.

She has the long view her daughter cannot have yet. She remembers when a plastic trophy felt like life or death. Now she can help her daughter zoom out, name the real value, and find it in the journey rather than the prize.

And every so often, the years collapse entirely. There is a moment in the dressing room, a convention-center ballroom full of hundreds of girls with their little suitcases of costumes on hangers, each one carving out three feet of space to run her routine, staring at the wall, locked in. Mary Elizabeth watches her daughter do it.

"That is like looking in a mirror thirty years ago," she says.

The throughline she wants a reader to see is not any single one of her lives. It is the fact that they add up, and that the adding up is the point. She offers herself as evidence. If you had told twenty-year-old Mary Elizabeth she would one day be chief operating officer of an accounting firm and partner in a tax firm, she could not have fathomed it. And yet, here she is.

A neuroplastic brain, she says, can take you anywhere. Her advice, delivered with a performer's timing: hire artists.

"We all contain multitudes," she says, "and that is our greatest asset."

WHAT YOU'D NEVER GUESS

A LIFE IN NUMBERS

Before the spreadsheets, there was a stage. The other math of Mary Elizabeth Warren.

3
The age she started dancing, leaping across the studio floor

16
Her age performing at Super Bowl XXXIV, behind Tina Turner

5'9"
The height that got her cast as a Disney villain, not a princess

8
Shows a week at her performing peak

7
Years she spent home, raising a baby

30
Years between her dressing room and her daughter's

"We all contain multitudes."



"Mary Elizabeth protects our company fiercely. She cares deeply about the quality of our work, the impact we have on our clients, and the reputation we've worked so hard to build. Every decision she makes considers what is best for the company and, even more importantly, what is best for our team. She leads without ego, never asking, "What's in this for me?" but instead, "What's best for all of us?" That kind of ownership, loyalty, and selfless leadership says more about who she is than any job title ever could." - ***Diana Gleason, Founder + CEO, DG Accounting***

Rheena Zoellers

“Maybe This One Is for Me”

She spent twenty-seven years supporting everyone else. At fifty-one, she finally started something that belongs to no one but her.

Rheena Zoellers did not want a personal trainer.

She wanted a gym membership, nothing more. But the sign-up came bundled with training hours, her two daughters were egging her on, and she caved. Then she canceled. Again and again. “I was really kind of relieved,” she laughs, remembering the appointments she dodged for months while the charges quietly piled up on her credit card.

Forty pounds down, she’s doing box jumps and chasing pull-ups she never imagined at fifty-one. And, more surprising to a woman who has spent twenty-seven years in the background of everyone else’s life, she has found the one thing that is hers alone.

“Maybe this one is for me,” she thought. She was right.

To understand why that sentence matters so much, you have to understand how rare it is for Rheena to say it. For twenty-seven years (before she had kids, and long after) she has worked in a support role, and she means support in the fullest sense of the word.

“I’ll do whatever grunt work you need me to do,” she says, “so you don’t have to worry about the little things.”

She is not a CPA. She is not an enrolled agent. “I hate numbers,” she admits. “I don’t even know why I’m in this kind of work.” What she does instead is make everyone around her look good, and she has spent a career being deliberately, contentedly invisible while doing it. When colleagues want to thank her, she has a standing request: “Gifts are appreciated but skip the shoutout. I get uncomfortable.”

She raised her daughters the same way she runs a firm’s back office: from just behind them. Her eldest is a dancer, deep in the world of color guard and competitions. Her youngest played indoor and beach volleyball. For years, their calendars were her calendar.

IN HER WORDS

Little by little

Five lines from Rheena Zoellers

On the before
“It’s never my schedule.”

On claiming it
“It’s my own now.”

On the turn
“This is actually cool. I can actually do this.”

On the habit
“After a while, it was just addicting.”

On what’s next
“I just want to try and push myself out of my comfort zone.”





"It's never my schedule," she says.

Then the girls grew up, graduated, started driving themselves to their own lives. And Rheena found herself, some days, with time she didn't know what to do with. She began to notice the shape of everyone's passions but her own.

"My husband has bowling. My eldest has dance, my youngest has volleyball," she says. "What do I have? Nothing."

That was the question sitting in the back of her mind when her eldest signed up at a new gym, and Rheena decided she wanted in too. What she did not want was accountability. She knew exactly what a trainer would mean: someone watching, someone checking, someone who would notice when she skipped.

So she found her exits. A campus tour with her youngest ended in a fall. She tripped, couldn't work out, and canceled two or three sessions in a row with something close to relief. Weeks passed. She never rebooked. The trainer texted, then stopped. Months later, she opened a credit card statement and realized she'd paid a lot of money for training she never used. She went back to the gym almost out of spite for the waste. "I might as well get my money's worth," she figured, "then just leave."

She did not leave.

The first couple of months, by her own account, she wasn't really trying. But her trainer eventually struck out on his own, coaching clients from his garage, and asked if she wanted to come along. She still had a few paid sessions left; he offered to honor them for free. "I've got nothing to lose," she remembers thinking. "If anything, what I have to lose is just the weight."

And this time, for reasons she can't fully explain except that she finally decided to, she listened. She did what he told her. And she felt it.

"This is actually cool. I can actually do this," she recalls. "I felt lighter, I felt more energized, and my brain fog just cleared." What began as obligation turned into something she now protects fiercely. "After a while," she says, "it was just addicting."

The program that changed her wasn't built on deprivation, which is the only reason it worked. Dieting had always failed her.

"When I'm hungry, I'm hangry," she says flatly. "Let me work out more, but don't reduce my food."

Her trainer's rule was the opposite: eat more of the right food, prioritize protein, make smarter versions of the things you love rather than banishing them. So she still eats her In-N-Out (a Double-Double, even, because that's double the protein); she just skips the spread or the cheese, not both. Her Chick-fil-A order became grilled nuggets with one shake of sauce instead of four packets to dip in. Her yogurt swapped artificial sweetener for plain nonfat with a drizzle of honey and fruit.

Small, sustainable, and, crucially, not a punishment.

What she couldn't get from anyone else was the part she says she hated most: someone who wouldn't let her off the hook. Her family, she knew, never would. "My kids would say, 'It's okay, mom, you can skip today, you deserve to rest, you work hard,'" she says. Her trainer says the opposite. He reviews her logged food and workouts, texts her when the numbers move the wrong way, asks why.

"I hate it," she says, and then, immediately: "But that's what I pay him for."

It is, quietly, the first arrangement in her life built entirely around holding her accountable instead of the other way around.

The results have a way of rewriting how she sees herself. She dropped from a size twelve to a size eight. She learned she could do a burpee and a push-up at once, something she'd watched other people do and assumed was permanently out of reach. The first time she attempted a box jump, she was terrified; now she lands it.

"If someone else can see me doing it," she says of her trainer's certainty, "then maybe I can do it."

For a woman who used to pick her clothes for comfort over anything trendy or nice, she's started to wonder, cautiously, whether she might dress to feel good rather than just to disappear. "Maybe I can be comfortable but look nice at the same time," she says. "That has never been in my mind before."

The confidence is leaking, gently, into the rest of her life. Training new hires still gives her anxiety every month, but less than it used to. She'll press a colleague for an answer now where before she'd have stayed quiet. "What's the worst that can happen?" she reasons. "They won't answer me."

Saying yes to this very interview was another rep of the same muscle. "I just want to try and push myself out of my comfort zone," she says, even as she admits that the closer the day came, the more she second-guessed it.

None of this has changed the part of her that loves being in the background. She's careful about that. "I still love helping people, putting them in front of me," she says.



"Nothing's changed there."

What's new is simply that she has finally added herself to the list.

She's already hit her goal weight, which meant a new question from her trainer: what now? She surprised herself with the answer. Not more weight loss; that was only ever a side effect. She wanted performance. She wanted to do something she genuinely didn't think she could.

So she chose pull-ups. She's working on them now, and she sees the thread running straight from the gym to the page you're reading. "Let me try to achieve a pull-up," she says. "Let me try to be open to something like this, opening up a part of my life, not just on social media, but to the public."

And if she could tell the woman who first walked into that gym anything, it's the thing she's still learning to believe.

"Don't be scared to try. The worst that can happen is that nothing changes, and you remain exactly where you are, safely within your comfort zone. But if you take the chance, you might discover just how much more is possible beyond it."



"Rheena Zoellers is one of those team members who is just so easy to work with and be around. She's responsive, dependable, proactive, and always willing to jump in and help. And she does so with genuine warmth and positivity. She consistently follows through, cares about the people around her, and truly makes our team better by being part of it!" ***– K.C. Eames, Director of CAS, Dark Horse CPAs***



Rachel Zsiga

Why Not Us

A foster parent, a respite home, a court appointed advocate: the part of Rachel Zsiga's life that surprises people most is the one she's least likely to mention.

Rachel Zsiga does not describe herself the way you might expect a foster parent to. She is not, she says, the naturally patient type, or the one brimming with easy warmth. Her gift is plainer than that.

"People are always going to be fed in my house," she says, "and you're always going to have a bed to sleep in."

That steady, unshowy dependability is the thread running through a part of her life few would guess at. Over the past few years she and her husband have fostered two boys for eight months, taken in other children for short stays, and served as a court appointed advocate for two sisters. She went to therapy to keep doing it. She would do it again. "Why not us," she says.

The idea had been with her for a long time before it became a decision. She and her husband first talked about fostering roughly ten years ago, back when a new baby and a toddler and two kids in grade school made the whole thing feel impossible. They waited. When all four children were finally in school, when they had moved to a district five minutes from every building and their routines had settled, the margin they needed was suddenly there.

Her husband, a teacher, had been watching the need up close for years. In the community where they used to live, he saw children who were, in effect, raising themselves and their siblings, worrying about food long before homework. In their small county there were more kids in foster care than in the far larger city an hour away.

"You can't do math if you're worried about all the other things," Rachel says.

She thought she knew what she was walking into. The family had hosted exchange students before, and she pictured something similar: capable kids who mostly needed a bit of guidance. It was not that.

The two boys who came, ages four and nine, arrived with almost nothing, and with the kind of history that reshapes an ordinary evening. Dinner became a lesson in a language they didn't have yet, that carrots were worth eating because they helped your body grow strong, that water went in the cup because that was what a body needed. Every child who has come through her house, Rachel says, has arrived with something around food. Some are painfully picky. Some overeat. Some hoard.

So she built structure where there had been none. Backpacks unpacked, school papers looked at, bikes ridden, and then, new to her own family, a half hour of reading before bed. Everyone in pajamas, teeth brushed, sitting quietly with a book, whether or not they could read one.

"At least you're sitting there, having your body wind down," she says.

Her younger sons still read before bed every night. The routine outlasted the children who prompted it.

Fostering asked something of her own four kids, too, who are now eleven, twelve, sixteen, and nineteen. It taught them, she says, to read other children with more grace. Her son who is almost thirteen became the boy teachers seat next to the kid who's acting out, because he'll encourage him rather than get pulled along. Her daughter, then fourteen, came along to a clothing closet to help the boys pick out school clothes, saw a call for volunteers, filled out the application, and has been going back every week since.

Not everyone leaned in the same way, and Rachel doesn't pretend otherwise. Her oldest, sixteen at the time, found the constant presence of other people harder, and she let him have his exits, his afternoons at the tennis courts, his room to himself.

Both things lived under one roof. The daughter who gladly pulled out the trundle bed and gave up her room. The son who needed the door to stay closed.



The eight months with the boys ended the way many placements do, with a mix of grief and relief she is honest enough to name. The family had burned out. They hadn't used respite care. And the boys were going somewhere good: to grandparents who lived close to their mother, so close that she could be there most evenings after work, making dinner, doing bedtime, practicing everything she'd spent eight months learning.

What Rachel remembers most warmly about that placement is not the boys. It's their mother.

She hadn't just completed the required eight weeks and stopped. She kept going to therapy, kept working through it, kept asking Rachel for advice on routines and hard moments because she wanted to become someone who could raise her sons. She did.

"It was great to see her turn her life around and decide that having her boys was worth it," Rachel says.

They still text. On Mother's Day, and around the start of school, back to school photos arrive.

After the boys left, Rachel went to therapy herself. What surfaced were things she had never had to face before, because she had always kept enough control of her own life to keep them at bay.

"When I wasn't in control of things," she says, "just what was bothering me, and why."

She learned to notice the first signs of tension in her own body, to ask whether a thing actually mattered, to return herself to calm so she could help someone smaller do the same.

She and her husband switched to respite care after that, short stays that gave everyone a defined edge. A weekend. Two weeks. "I can do anything for the weekend," she says, and so could the children, knowing the arrangement wasn't forever.

She remembers all of them. There's still artwork on the fridge. One boy left a collection of rocks on the basketball goal, and they're still there. One little girl turned three at their house and sang to herself on every car ride, preschool songs about pumpkins, cartoon themes, things she made up on the spot.

By nature, Rachel says, she is not someone who gets attached, and the short stays suit that. She enjoys the children while they're with her without needing them to fill something in her.

"I want to be able to give kids the things they need," she says.

That instinct, to find the gap and stand in it, is what led her to become a court appointed special advocate, a CASA. It started with frustration. One of the boys' caseworkers kept promising the therapy referrals that never came, so Rachel



made the calls herself, found the providers the state would cover, fit the appointments around the school schedule.

She decided she wanted to do that on purpose.

As a CASA, she was assigned two sisters and became the one fixed point in a system that never stops moving. Caseworkers change. Judges change. Cases slide from one county to another. A CASA stays from the day a child enters care until the day they reach somewhere permanent. She visited the girls at least twice a month, took them to lunch and ball games, wrote the reports that go to the judge before court.

She is careful not to overstate her part. The girls were placed with a grandmother who advocated fiercely for them. But Rachel understands exactly what she was there to be, and she thinks often about what all that turnover does to a child.

"It probably makes them wonder if they're worth sticking around for," she says. "If there will be anything that lasts."

One day she was running late to a school lunch with one of the girls. She'd stopped for food and it took too long, and by the time she walked into the cafeteria the girl was already at the table.

"I didn't think you were going to come," the girl told her.

Rachel doesn't want to be that. She wants to be the one who shows up when she says she will, who keeps the commitment, because for these children that has so often been the thing that fell through.

Ask her what she wishes more people understood, and she pushes back on two ideas at once: that fostering is only for the endlessly patient and naturally maternal, or that people do it for the money. Neither describes her. She points instead to all the smaller ways in that don't require taking a child for a year, because that commitment isn't one everyone can make.

Bring a meal, and be specific about it. "I'm going to bring you dinner. Is Tuesday better or Wednesday?" Buy toothbrushes, because kids arrive without them. Donate clothes to the closet. Wash a basket of laundry. Her own family found their way in: a mother who is a clearance shopper turning up shirts in the right size and the right cartoon, a mother in law who cooks the foods the kids love, a sister who mailed a pair of Crocs one boy wouldn't stop mentioning.

"They made them feel like they were family, too," Rachel says.

Her CASA case has closed now. The two girls are moving several hours away to live with their dad, into a new county, a new division, a new unknown. She has their numbers. She'll text them funny pictures, ask how the first week of school goes.

Her oldest starts college this week. There is a lot changing in her house at once, and for now the long term placements are on hold. But she isn't finished. She's a doer, she says, someone who would rather find the thing that needs doing than sit still.

And she already knows what she'd do next if she could design it: keep company with the mothers, the ones like the boys' mom, who want to learn and be well enough to bring their children home.

"Why not me," she says. "Why not us."



"A single highlight might simply be how reliable Rachel is. She gracefully but firmly reminds me to do things that I've forgotten (like reviewing the financials), and guess what? I never have to wait or fear that she will forget. She's like the atom by which the atomic clock is set."
– Ben Towne, Managing Partner, Towne Advisory Services



Jen Hoover

How One Diagnosis Rewrote Her Whole Story

A late ADHD diagnosis didn't shrink Jen Hoover. It explained her. Now she runs an operations team of eleven the way she wishes someone had run things for her.

For most of her life, Jen Hoover got the same feedback, in the same words. She's really smart, her teachers told her mother, but she doesn't apply herself.

She finished her homework and then forgot to turn it in. She ditched class because it was so boring. She skipped college because she was done with school entirely.

It would take until she was thirty-eight for the fuller story to arrive: inattentive-type ADHD, the quiet, internal kind that so often goes unnamed in women until midlife.

Now Jen leads an operations team of eleven, and manages her days, deliberately, hour by hour.

"It made me more compassionate with myself instead of so hard on myself," she says of the diagnosis. "It changed everything."

The surprise isn't just the diagnosis. It's how long she carried the weight without a name for it.

For years, Jen ran a familiar loop. She would overwork, feel the burnout coming, and hit a wall where all she could do was sit on her couch and recover from the week. She felt like she was doing everything right and still couldn't keep up. It was taking a toll on her mental health.

So she went to her doctor to rule out vitamin deficiencies, anything physical. Everything came back clean. You're healthy, they told her. You're fine.

"This just doesn't feel normal," she remembers thinking.

As ADHD started surfacing on social media, she was wary of it. It's easy, she knew, to see a list of symptoms and decide it's you. So she went further than the feeds, into real resources and long conversations with her therapist, and something clicked. ADHD, she learned, isn't simply the inability to get things done. It reaches into your mental life far more than most people realize.

The diagnosis itself was, in her words, almost cruelly designed for someone with ADHD. Long. Paperwork-heavy. She had to be evaluated by multiple mental health professionals, who reached back into her childhood and interviewed the people who had watched her grow up, her parents among them, and her husband. By the time she reached the end of it, three or four months had passed.



What she got, finally, was a name: inattentive-type ADHD, where the mind runs hyperactive even when the body doesn't.

Waiting for it was its own kind of hard. Imposter syndrome is a





near-constant companion for Jen, the sense that whatever she's doing, she isn't good enough to be doing it. It followed her into the diagnosis, too.

"I was gaslighting myself," she says. "You probably don't have ADHD. You're probably making it all up."

Only as the evaluators asked their questions did she start to recognize herself in the answers, and feel, for the first time, that she was on the right track.

Looking back now, she can see the girl who had it all along.

The feedback from teachers never wavered: really smart, doesn't apply herself. Mornings were a battle, her brain slow to switch on, the school day something to be endured. She couldn't hold focus unless something genuinely interested her, and through middle and high school, almost nothing did. She was shy, which made friendship hard on top of everything else, and she was often in the makeup-homework pile, or simply not there at all.

Her teachers liked her enough to keep giving her another chance. Even placement in the advanced track didn't help, because the problem was never her intelligence.

So when she finished high school, she was finished with school, full stop.

The turn came from a coworker. Jen had drifted into administrative jobs, office work, still unsure what she wanted. This colleague was direct, the kind of direct Jen has learned she needs, and she didn't soften it: what you're doing is beneath you.

Then she started teaching. Accounts payable first. Once Jen mastered that, payroll. Then debits and credits, the real machinery of accounting.

"She changed the whole trajectory of my life and my career," Jen says.

It was in that hands-on apprenticeship that Jen discovered how she actually learns. Not by being told what to do, but by getting in, seeing how things work, and building something better. It's the instinct she credits for making her a strong operator today. Accounting, it turned out, felt like a puzzle, and her brain gravitated straight to it.

She decided to go back for the degree. She was in her late twenties, working full time, and it was hard in every sense. She failed classes and retook them. She sat through late nights and general-education requirements that had nothing to do with what she wanted.

"I cried a lot, for sure," she says.

What kept her in it was partly stubbornness, the refusal to let herself down again, and partly her mother, who had gone back for her own degree in her fifties. "I'm half her age," Jen remembers thinking. "I can definitely do this." It took longer than it should have. She did it anyway.

All of that came before the diagnosis. She was building the life first, and understanding it only later.

What understanding changed, most of all, was how she treats herself on a hard day. Jen still works twice as hard as she thinks she should have to, and still carries the guilt that comes with feeling like she isn't doing enough.

Her answer, now, is rest.

She has learned to disconnect at the end of the day, imperfectly, and to lean into the hyperfocus rather than resent it. One month it's puzzles. The next she's teaching herself to bake. She walks, because physical movement is one of the most reliable ways she has to manage her ADHD without medication, for the plain dopamine of it. She tries to eat well, even when all she wants is carbohydrates and candy.

She has gotten better at catching the burnout before it flattens her, though it still comes. When it does, it feels like the flu, her whole body heavy, her mind unable to make even small decisions. On the worst days she can't decide what to eat and has to have food simply delivered and handed to her. It's all-consuming.

"This just doesn't feel normal," she remembers thinking.

Jen Hoover

This past year was her best on that front, even with a move in February that pushed her to tell her husband she needed a week in bed, and nothing else.

He is, she says, her steadiest support, the one who notices when she hasn't eaten and makes sure there's food.

The diagnosis reshaped her as a leader, too. Already empathetic, Jen now watches for the signs in the eleven people she manages, some of them neurodivergent, some not, many of them prone to the same overwork and fear of making a mistake that she knows from the inside. When she sees someone log nine hours without a lunch break, she checks in. She guards against handing out more than a person can carry.

She pushes back on the idea that punishing hours are just part of accounting. If the work is too much, she believes, you hire someone, or you find the inefficiency. You don't grind people down.

"I'm just going to protect them with all that I have," she says.

Her newest boundary is the hardest one, and it's for herself: speaking up. As a self-described people pleaser, she has always taken on more than she should rather than say it's too much. This year, she's practicing the sentence out loud. In her personal life, that means declining the dinner or the party when she knows she needs rest, and trying, a little more each time, not to feel guilty about it.

What she wants other women to hear is a correction to the story ADHD often gets told as. Yes, she's a fast problem solver who makes connections quickly and locks in on what she loves. But it's also a disability, and an invisible one, especially for women who mask so well that no one sees the screaming inside.

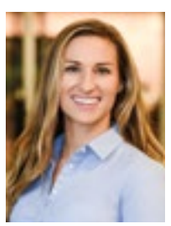
As hormones shift in the perimenopausal years, she explains, the masking that once worked stops working. That, she believes, is why so many women arrive at their diagnosis late, in their thirties and forties, when everything suddenly feels hard again.

There's comfort waiting on the other side of that, she's found. At a recent industry conference, she heard of a firm that does accounting exclusively for people with ADHD. She loved that. It captured what she most wants people to know.

"You'll find your people," she says. "Be open, be honest about your diagnosis, and get the support you actually need."

She has watched it ripple already. ADHD is hereditary, and her nine-year-old nephew has been diagnosed too. To him, it's almost unbelievable that his aunt went undiagnosed into her thirties.

To her, being there for him is proof of how much a name, arriving even late, can change.

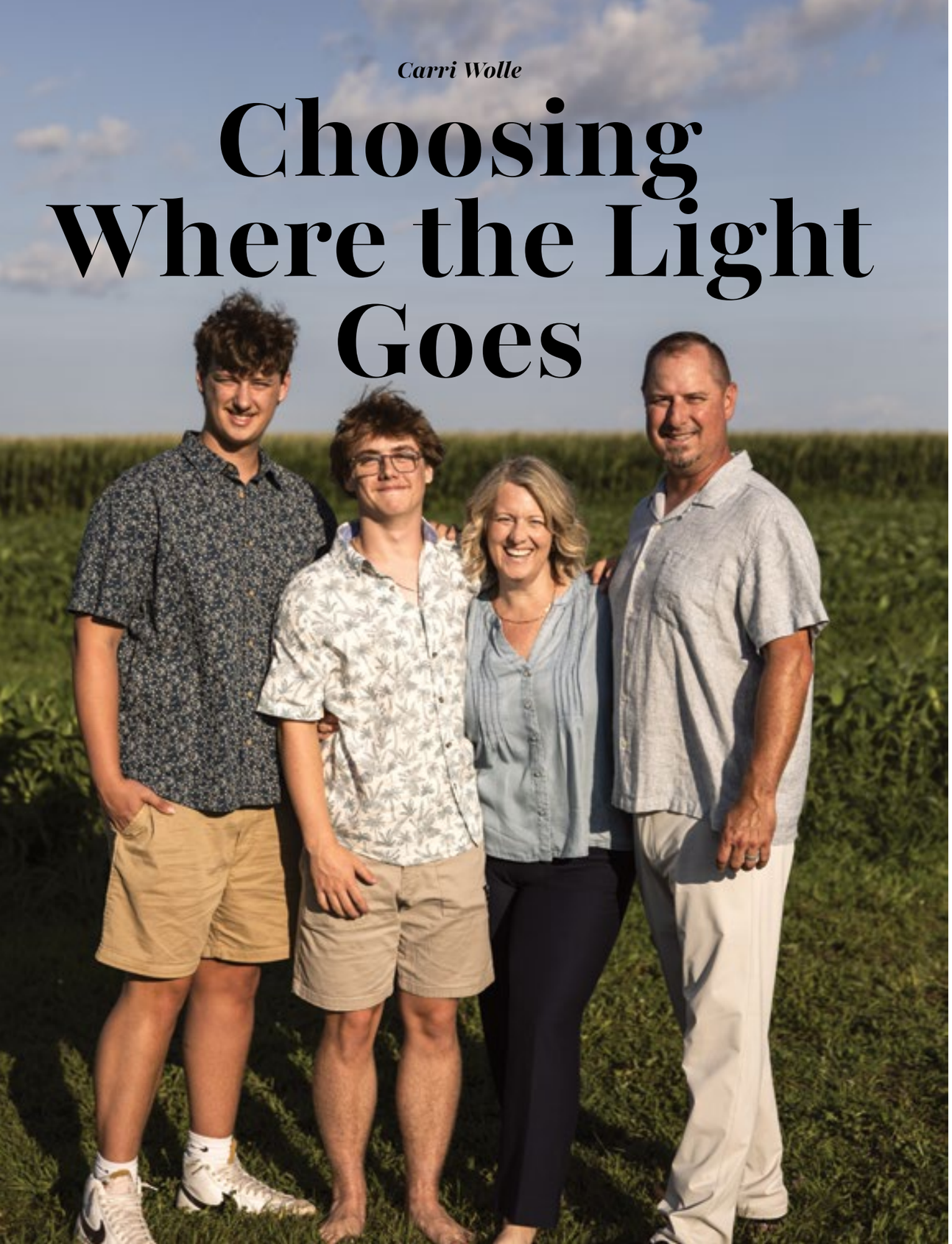


"One thing about Jen Hoover that has always stood out to me is that she genuinely gives a damn. She doesn't need something to fall neatly within her job description to take ownership of it. If there's a problem, someone needs help, or something just needs to get done, she steps in and figures it out. She cares deeply about our clients, our team, and Momentum as a whole, and you can see it in the things she takes on when no one is asking her to. That kind of ownership and care is incredibly hard to teach, and it says more about Jen than any title I could give her."

- Nikole Mackenzie, Founder CEO, Momentum Accounting

Carri Wolle

Choosing Where the Light Goes



She has reinvented herself every few years across a life of military moves. Now, with her boys becoming more independent, Carri Wolle is discovering the freedom that comes with setting boundaries, choosing intentionally, and making room for what matters most.

For most of her life, Carri Wolle could not say no. "I'd probably have FOMO," she admits, "fear of missing out on some fun, an exciting story." So she went. To everything. Then her sister offered to pay for a flotation-tank session, and Carri, who will happily throw herself onto a white-water raft, heard herself say no thanks. "I just don't want to sit alone in my thoughts and float and be wet," she laughs. It was a small thing. It was also a signal. After fifteen years as a stay-at-home mom, moving her family across the country again and again while her husband deployed, Carri has entered a new chapter, one where her boys drive themselves to practice and some of her time, at last, belongs to her.

The surprise is not that she can say no, but that after a lifetime of rebuilding, she's finally learning that saying no isn't about missing out. It's about making room for the things that matter most and choosing where her yes belongs.

Carri has done a lot of rebuilding. As a Navy wife married to a submariner, she moved roughly every three years, and each move meant starting over. New schools. New doctors. A new community to break into.

"I feel like I've been reinventing my life every three years," she says.

She got good at it. But she never stopped being the newcomer. "I'm always a newcomer," she says. "I'm never the roots of the tree that have been there always."

Some moves were harder than others. Virginia, where the family landed most recently, was the hardest. It is a small town where people live next door to someone they went to kindergarten with, a kind of rootedness Carri had never known. Breaking in took time, and for a while she admits she simply sat in the unhappiness. "I hate it here. All my people are elsewhere."

The willingness to start over, though, was there from the very beginning. In high school, while her friends collected college acceptance letters and wore them like proof of worth, Carri didn't apply anywhere. She took a scholarship to community college to save money, then transferred to the University of Florida for a degree in animal science.

"The path doesn't have to look any specific way," she says. She believed it about herself long before she started saying it to her own kids.

That belief carried her through a résumé that shouldn't hang together and somehow does. A stint at Southwest Airlines. Fifteen years home with her sons. And now, customer service manager at Steadfast, an accounting firm she joined knowing nothing about the work, hired by a boss who liked her personality and promised to teach her the rest. She went from part-time to full-time, from bookkeeping to customer service to managing it.

None of it was the plan. There was never really a plan. "It doesn't all go," she says, "but somehow it does."

What makes this chapter different is who it is for.

For fifteen years, Carri was the stabilizer, the one who made every new town feel like home so her family wouldn't feel the ground shift beneath them. That was the job, and she wouldn't trade it. In many ways it is still the job. She remains at the beck and call of her boys, at every game she can make, happy to have a front-row seat to the lives they are building. They will always be her reason for being. A crowded table, and sons who still want to hang around as they get older, is her





whole definition of success. What has changed is the math. Her sons are nineteen and sixteen now, both of them driving, and the hours she once spent shuttling them to volleyball practice have come back to her all at once.

"What do I do with my nights? What is happening?" she remembers thinking.

The question underneath it was bigger. "What does this life look like for me as Carri," she asks, "not as mom, not as wife?" The answer has been a slow rediscovery of the things she set aside. She still loves photography. She has more than eighty thousand photos on her camera roll, though she is quick to say she prefers being behind the lens, not in front of it. She loves people, loves to travel, loves the version of herself that gets to be curious again.

She has also made peace with a quieter truth about who she is now. The woman who once said yes to everything calls herself, these days, an "extroverted introvert." She needs the alone time. The 2 a.m. thoughts find her whether she invites them or not.

The real test of her new boundaries came this year, in the middle of grief.

Carri lost her father this year. Around the same time, her sister's husband fell seriously ill, and the family shifted into what she calls triage mode, moving from one crisis to the next. Two months after her dad passed, a long-planned trip sat on the calendar: two weeks in Minnesota for her in-laws' fiftieth anniversary.

She couldn't go for two weeks. She knew it in her body.

So, she said so. "I'm not saying I'm not coming," she told her husband. "I'm just saying I need a week." She sent Chad and the boys ahead to celebrate, and she stayed behind, close to her mother, close to her sister. "Right now, I need some time." He was disappointed at first. Then he understood. She joined them later, and the visit was a great one.

That is the balance she is still learning to strike, the one that used to feel impossible: staying open to what comes while refusing what she has no room for. "It's a feeling," she says, and she



has stopped ignoring it. "Something's telling me I need to change something."

The point was never to say no to everyone. It was to have something left. "You can't do it to the point where you're exhausted and have nothing left for yourself."

She has not done any of it alone. There are her parents, who never directed her but always gave her, in her words, a soft spot to land. Also, her sister and a tribe of women she had collected from nearly every place she has ever lived. They don't talk every day. It doesn't matter. When they call, "no time has passed." The ache is that none of them live nearby.

If there is a lesson in the hardest move of her life, it is the one Virginia taught her.

"Virginia taught me I can survive hard things."

She is not finished reinventing. Her mother has always called her a bit of a gypsy, and five years into one house, Carri is already itching for what's next. Change, for her, is not a threat. It is oxygen. "I get less complacent," she says. Every new place, every trip, "adds pieces to your soul that you never knew existed."

And she keeps surprising herself. Fifteen years ago, she would not have pictured any of this: the accounting firm, the manager title, the creative work she keeps alive on the side. She went from part-time to full-time to running a team, and she is not slowing down.

"I've still got it," she says. "It's good," and I am excited to see what comes next.



"There is so much I could say about Carri, but what I'll settle on is that words cannot express how wonderful, amazing, helpful it is to work with someone who you can trust to handle anything and everything that comes her way with humor, professionalism, and grace. I'd clone Carri if I could."
- Andrea MacDonald, CEO, Steadfast Accounting

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Kathleen Toribio

Grace Meets You Where You Are

She spent years being good enough. Then she learned she was loved anyway, and it changed how she carries everything, including the hard years still coming.

"I'm doing everything right. Why did I need to go through that?" That was the question running through Kathleen Toribio's mind at twenty-one, in the worst season of her life. A heartbreak. Then, months later, her father's stroke. A small, absent-minded slip at work that turned into a disciplinary action. "When it rained, it really poured," Kath says. She was the firstborn, the straight-A kid who never rebelled, the single breadwinner for a family of four. She had done everything by the book. What people would never guess, meeting the composed, hard-to-read woman she is now, is that this was the year her faith stopped being inherited and became her own.

People find Kath intimidating. She's the first to tell you so.

"The print-friendly term is resting poker face," she says, and she can laugh about it. The truth underneath is gentler, and a little disarming. "I might be as intimidated by them as they are of me." She keeps to herself because she doesn't want to bother anyone. It takes her time to warm up. The face people read as cold is, more often, a person who is overwhelmed by other people too.

That gap, between how she's seen and who she actually is, sits at the center of her story. Because the thing that closed it wasn't a personality change. It was grace.

The year everything came at once

She was relatively new to the workforce then, sheltered, doing everything a good firstborn was supposed to do. Church when she could make it. Memorized prayers. Obedience, largely because the alternative meant punishment. Work, home, work, home. She sent herself to school while supporting the family, and she didn't step out of line.

Then came the heartbreak, her first and, as she puts it, her last. Then her father's stroke, only months behind it. What she remembers most is what her body wouldn't do.

"For months, I could not cry," she says. She kept thinking that if she could just cry it out, the weight might lift. It didn't come. She recognized, for the first time, the impulse she'd only ever seen in shows, the one where a person curls into a fetal position. "Back then, I understood why."

She never missed work. She showed up on autopilot, moving through what she calls almost an out-of-body experience. And in that fog she made one careless mistake, a small security lapse that carried real consequences. The discipline that followed felt like the last thing piled onto an already impossible year.

She had followed every rule. If this was punishment, she thought, it felt wildly disproportional.

An inherited faith with no answers

The faith she'd grown up with couldn't hold the weight of that question. It had been passed down, from her parents, her aunts, something you followed the way you followed house rules, to avoid harder times. She believed, in the way you believe what you've been handed. She had never really understood it.



She'd been trying to, quietly, for a while. On her hour-long commute she started listening to an audio Bible, and almost immediately she hit a wall.

"How is this book so bloody and violent?" she remembers thinking. The God of those pages didn't seem to match the Jesus she'd been taught on Sundays. She had questions, and she wanted a Bible study to take them to. She couldn't find one that fit. Her rest day fell midweek, she worked nights, and nothing lined up.

So the questions sat there, unanswered, alongside everything else she was carrying.

The message that came right on time

Then a teammate at the call center where she worked messaged her, out of nowhere, and invited her to a Bible study. It happened to fall right after her shift.

She said yes immediately, without hesitation.

Looking back, she's convinced the timing wasn't luck. "God really meets you where you are," she says. The seeds had already been planted. There was the audio Bible. There was even a copy of The Purpose Driven Life someone had handed her back in high school, a book that quoted Scripture so heavily she now believes it's the reason she ever cracked open the real thing.

"I would never have been interested in opening a Bible," she says, "if not for that."

The thing she couldn't earn

The moment it clicked came through a single passage: Luke 7, the story of two people who each owe a moneylender, one a large debt, one small, and neither able to pay. Jesus asks which of them will love the lender more.

For Kath, something reorganized itself.

Whether the debt was big or small, she realized, no one could pay it back. And no amount of obedience afterward could undo what had already been done. She had spent her whole life inside a different math. Firstborn pressure. An Asian household's quiet meritocracy, at school and at home, where you earn what you work for.

Grace ran the other direction entirely.

"It takes the pressure off you to perform," she says. You don't do good in order to be forgiven and loved. "You are loved anyway." The good simply follows, as a result of the love rather than a down payment on it. She calls the shift overwhelming, and a relief.

The proof shows up in the small hours

You can see what grace changed most clearly in the parts of her life no one watches.

Kath is an introvert who works from home, alone with her tasks most of the day. In an industry she says is full of horror stories, people logging in, doing the bare minimum, disappearing, she treats the work itself as a form of worship.

"Even if no one is watching, God is," she says.

She considers the job a blessing to steward, so she gives it her full effort and her integrity, especially when no one is supervising. The discipline isn't for her reputation. It's for something quieter than that.

And when someone still gets under her skin, because they do, she doesn't pretend otherwise.



the correction comes fast. A silent prayer. A recentering. "I myself have been forgiven and loved," she says, "and only through that can I forgive others and love others, however difficult they are."

What she carries now

That understanding is being tested again, in real time. Her brother, eight years younger, is going through chemotherapy. This weekend brings his fourth round.

She doesn't narrate it as a crisis so much as a preparation she can now see in hindsight, the insurance they were somehow wise enough to get, the ways they were readied before they knew what for.

"How your current challenges are, God has already prepared you for it beforehand," she says.

She worries. He's so young. But underneath the worry is something she can only describe as anticipation, a curiosity about what all of this is for.

What she wants next is twofold. At work, she wants to keep sharpening her skills as a bookkeeper, so her firm can grow and be a blessing to the businesses it serves. In her own life, she wants ministry, to be more active in leading people toward the faith that rebuilt her.

If she could reach the twenty-one-year-old in the fetal position, the one who couldn't cry, she knows what she'd tell her.

"That's not the worst that you can experience. There will be losses. There will be people who come and go. But follow God's prompting to know him, because even if you get to worse places, as long as you are with him, you'll be okay."



""One thing that says more about Kathleen Toribio than any job title ever could is the way she takes ownership of the people and responsibilities entrusted to her. Kath doesn't simply manage our team—she supports them, solves problems, and genuinely wants the people around her to succeed. Over the years, she has become someone I trust not only with the operations of my business, but also with helping me protect and grow the vision we are building. Her loyalty, consistency, and commitment to our team are invaluable, and that's exactly why I nominated her." ***- Stephanie Matlock, Founder & CFO, Empower Bookkeeping Firm***



Jess Bentley

His Miracle Smile

A decade, nine surgeries, and one mother learning that the hardest part was never the medicine, it was watching her son learn to be brave.

Jess Bentley remembers the exact moment she knew something was wrong. She was twenty weeks pregnant with her third child, lying still for what should have been a routine anatomy scan, when the technician started stalling. "They just kept saying, I can't get a really good look at a few things," Jess recalls.

Then the technician left the room to get the doctor.

"I've never had that happen," Jess says. She had an inkling already.

The doctor came in and told her, gently, that her baby appeared to have a cleft, though they didn't yet know how severe. He also told her there were options, including ending the pregnancy, if she couldn't handle it.

Jess didn't hesitate.

"No, I want this baby. We waited for him. I'm so excited for him."

She had some frame of reference. Her own sister had been born with a minor unilateral cleft, just on the lip, corrected with a single surgery. Jess was four at the time, and years later, she remembered her sister confiding how something as small as lipstick could make her feel like she stood out. But a mild case in a girl was not the same as what the doctors were describing now.

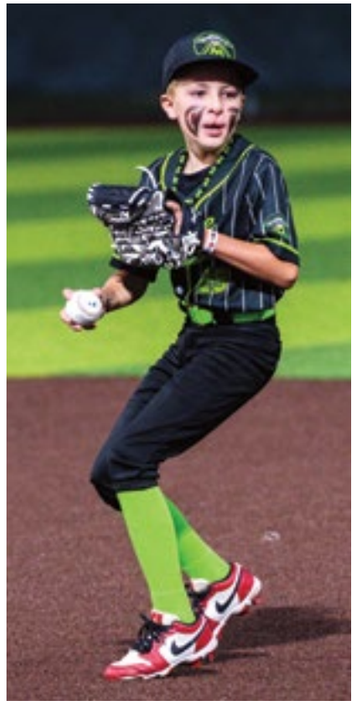
"I was just super overwhelmed," Jess says, "and I knew nothing. Even though I know a tiny bit, I have no clue what this is going to hold."

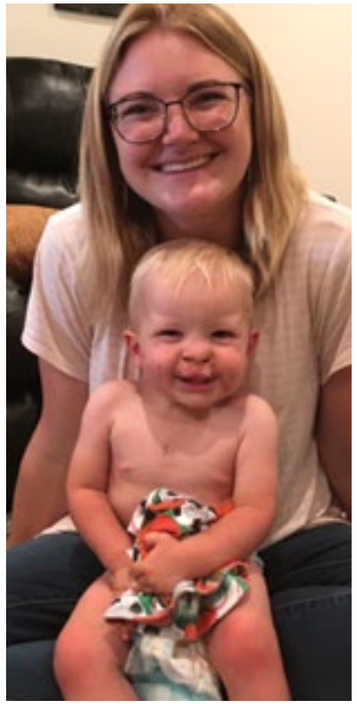
When her son was born, the reality was more severe than she'd braced for: a bilateral cleft, complete on both sides, running from his lip through his palate to the back of his throat. And yet, in the same breath, there was relief. He was healthy, with no other developmental issues, the biggest of her babies so far.

"There's a lot of kids that have cleft lip and palate that end up having other differences," Jess says. "I was grateful that he was there and a good size."

The joy didn't last uninterrupted. Shortly after birth, his breathing pattern worried doctors enough that he was rushed to the NICU, a habit of holding his breath when upset that, Jess says, he still has today.

His name is Sawyer, and he was nine days old for his first surgery, a procedure to remove a tooth bud he'd been born with. Jess's husband







went in with him. Jess stayed outside.

"I could just hear him screaming," she says. "There's nothing you can do. That's my baby. They have no clue what's happening to them."

It would not be the last time she sat outside a door like that.

Three months later came the surgery that closed his lip and palate and placed a prosthesis in the roof of his mouth. When Jess and her husband were brought back to see him, swollen from anesthesia, his cry sounded different, his face looked different.

"It didn't look like my son," Jess says. "I thought, this isn't him."

It was the ear tag, a small marking he'd been born with, that told her otherwise. "Then I was comforted," she says. "But he sounded completely different."

There would be nine surgeries in total over the next decade: procedures on his soft palate for speech, the slow correction of a top jaw that had formed in three separate pieces instead of one, the removal of extra teeth, the joining of a lip that had been split in thirds.

One of the hardest came when Sawyer was around eighteen months old, old enough to understand he was being taken from his parents, but too young to understand why.

"He just started crying and reaching for us," Jess remembers. "That was one of the hardest things."

Layered onto the surgeries themselves was the logistics of them. When the family moved from Utah to Texas, Jess had to find an entirely new surgical team, essentially "break up" with a surgeon they'd only just met because his plan didn't match the pace they'd agreed on with Sawyer's original team. She spent roughly six months researching before finding the right fit in Dallas, learning along the way to ask pointed questions about a surgeon's flexibility: whether they treated every case identically, or adjusted to the child in front of them.

Then came a different kind of surgery, the emotional kind.

Sawyer started kindergarten during COVID and wore a mask his entire first year. The next year, when masks came off, he didn't want his to.

"What if these people I've become friends with see my face and don't want to be my friend anymore," he told his mother.

Jess thought of the movie Wonder, of a mother's encouragement to a son afraid to be seen. She told Sawyer he was amazing, that the people worth having around him would accept him as he was.

"The people that are mean to you are not the people you want to be around."

What has struck Jess most, watching Sawyer grow through all of it, is his instinct to turn hard things into something lighter. After one surgery, his head still wrapped and his face swollen, he was dancing to make his sisters laugh.

"He just likes to make everything funny all the time, regardless," Jess says.

On the baseball field, where he plays now, she sees the same thing: a kid who is competitive but spends most of his energy cheering everyone else on.

"He gets to give people the love he wants them to feel, so they never feel the way he has."

Jess eventually started an Instagram account, @hismiraclesmile, after finding that the parent forums recommended by doctors were either frightening or too clinical to be useful. She wanted a place that showed the actual day to day: things like the fact that Sawyer's food would come out of his nose as a baby because his palate wasn't yet closed, details no one else was sharing. Today the account has around 700 followers.

"I don't want somebody else to feel so alone in this," she says.

The lessons have rippled outward. Watching her son face teasing has made Jess quicker to speak up when she sees someone else being treated unkindly. It has also softened her toward the people doing the teasing.

"Hurt people hurt people," she says. "They have their own stuff going on."

And it has shaped how she raises her other four children: an awareness, she says, of how fragile and short life actually is, and a determination to meet her kids with compassion rather than rigidity.

Sawyer has one more surgery ahead, a jaw and nasal surgery scheduled for when he turns fourteen. Jess feels something closer to peace about it than she once did. He can tell her now when something hurts. He understands what's happening to him. The recovery, she knows from experience, will take about a month.

"It always works out," she says.

What she hopes he carries forward isn't the surgeries themselves, but what sharing them has done. Sawyer has met two older kids who also grew up with clefts, and looking up to them has shown him what's possible on the other side.

"I hope he understands that being vulnerable and sharing his experiences helps people feel seen and brings people together."

It's a lesson Jess has been living out loud for ten years, one surgery, one hard conversation, one small act of courage at a time.

THE STORY IN NUMBERS

20
weeks pregnant when Jess learned something was different

9 days
old for Sawyer's first surgery

9
total surgeries by age ten

6
months spent finding a new surgeon after the move to Texas

14
Sawyer's age at his next scheduled surgery

700
followers on ...@hismiraclesmile

"I don't want somebody else to feel so alone in this."
- Jess Bentley



"More than anything, Jess is genuinely one of the kindest, most positive people I know... truly a ray of sunshine on our team. She shows up for people, celebrates them, encourages them, and brings an energy that you just can't put in a job description. We're incredibly lucky to have her."
- Ashley Ford, Business Owner, Pretty Penny LLC



Chelsea Lyman

Wonderful Chaos

She once pictured herself as a veterinarian. She became something better: the woman a missing piglet, a herd of 4-H sheep, and four kids all come home to.

Chelsea Lyman grew up memorizing dog breeds from a book and dreaming of veterinary school. Decades later, on a homestead outside Powell, Wyoming, her days blur into a steady rhythm of motherhood and menagerie: two horses, four dogs, a flock of 4-H sheep, seven chickens, and two pigs, one of them named Lucky Daisy after she survived a dog attack and two days missing in a nearby alfalfa field. "I think that's just part of who I am," Chelsea says of her pull toward animals. She never became a vet. Instead, she built a life where the answer to what she really wanted was outside, waiting, the whole time.

The pull started early. As a girl, she played horses and dogs with her sisters and friends, showed in 4-H herself, and kept a dog breed book she'd memorized cover to cover by age nine. "When you're nine years old, you can memorize anything," she says. The plan, for a long time, was veterinary school. She earned her associate's degree in animal science and was headed down that path.

Then she started a family in her early twenties, and the plan changed. "I just pivoted," she says. "I had totally different priorities." She never went to vet school. But she never stopped needing animals in her life, and over the years since, she's found a quieter way to keep that piece of herself alive: through her kids, through 4-H, through a homestead that fills up a little more every year.

Chelsea and her husband both grew up near Powell and haven't strayed far from home. Their property holds an updated 1936 farmhouse shaded by cottonwood trees nearly as old as the house itself, a small barn and loafing shed for the animals, a yard, and a treehouse the previous owners built that her kids still climb into. Two horses. Four dogs. Seven chickens. A flock of ewes her thirteen-year-old daughter raises for 4-H, lambing them each winter and showing them at the county fair each summer. And, most recently, two pigs belonging to her nine-year-old son, Clark.

Ask Chelsea what a normal day looks like and the honest answer is that there isn't one. Mornings start around six, getting kids fed, dressed, and out the door. Somewhere in there she carves out a window to work, usually while her two-year-old is content enough to let her. By early afternoon, she's back to farm and family: driving kids to practices, managing whatever the animals need that day, keeping a household of six people running. "It's wonderful chaos," she says. "You just try to catch the most important balls in the air."

Everyone in the family has a role. Her daughter's sheep are hers to manage, from breeding to feeding to showing, and she's started earning her own money selling lambs at the 4-H sale









each summer, half of it saved, some spent, some given away. Clark's pigs are his responsibility, and he has taken it seriously, researching what they should eat and writing his notes down in a notebook. The horses are shared between Chelsea and her daughter. The dogs rotate through whoever's turn it is. "Everybody has to pitch in," Chelsea says, and when one of them can't, whether they're sick, busy, or simply overwhelmed, someone else steps in without being asked.

That system was tested hardest the week Clark got his pig.

It was his ninth birthday present, a piglet the family picked up on a Wednesday afternoon, the day before school started. They had never owned a pig before and didn't yet know how quickly one could dig its way out of an enclosure. Within an hour of getting her home, she was gone, chased off by a neighbor's dogs and badly hurt. The family searched until after dark, going door to door to warn neighbors, posting in local social media groups, checking for any sign of her. They found no blood trail, no piglet.

The search continued the next day. Chelsea's older daughter, who does online school and had more flexibility that afternoon, set out a cage with watermelon, a favorite of pigs, near where the piglet was last seen, and walked the fields and roadside looking for her. By evening, twenty-four hours in, the family had run out of ideas.

Then, on Friday, while Chelsea was in the middle of a work call, the doorbell rang.

Her neighbor was standing there, holding the piglet in his arms. She was alive.

"I couldn't believe it," Chelsea says. "I was just in shock." She grabbed the piglet, wounds and all, straight into her work clothes, and started treating her on instinct: cleaning what she could, texting anyone who might know a livestock vet, working out a penicillin dose from what they had on hand. Getting a vet out to see a pig, a cow, or a sheep in that part of Wyoming isn't easy. Demand outpaces the number of vets willing to make the trip, so most of the doctoring falls to whoever owns the animal.

That evening, the family discovered how bad the wounds actually were. The piglet had been out in the August heat for two days, and the injuries were infested with maggots. Chelsea and her family spent an hour and a half cleaning them out, then kept her inside the house, in a crate, for two more days to keep the flies off while the wounds healed. Eventually, with a vet's guidance on a second antibiotic and a proper wound wash, she started to recover.

Clark named her Daisy. The family started calling her Lucky Daisy.

"She is one lucky little piglet," Chelsea says. "I don't know that she would have come back from it if we hadn't found her when we did."

It is, Chelsea admits, just one version of what a day can look like in her house. Something is always happening. An animal gets hurt, a kid needs picking up, a meeting runs into a crisis nobody could have scheduled around. What she has learned, across four kids and a rotating cast of livestock, is not how to eliminate the chaos but how to move through it: prioritize, delegate, and trust that everyone, herself included, will show up for whatever needs them most that day.

She sees the same lesson taking root in her kids. Watching her daughter manage a small flock of sheep, or Clark research pig nutrition well enough to fill a notebook, Chelsea sees kids learning what it means to be responsible for something that depends on them, to show up even after a hard day, to feel the loss when they eventually sell an animal they raised. "There's tears shed at the end, usually," she says. "But then they start looking forward to the next project."

Chelsea never became the veterinarian she once pictured. What she built instead is harder to summarize and, by her own account, more her: a homestead full of animals her kids are learning to care for the way she once dreamed of caring for animals herself, a family that pitches in without being asked, and a version of the rural life she always wanted, even if it took a decade and a very lucky piglet to prove it was still hers all along.

"I really do it for them," she says, "but I really started because living the rural lifestyle was part of who I am."



"Chelsea is the backbone of LedgerGurus. The business has quadrupled in size since she came into her role and she continues to manage all the parts and pieces part time in and around her kids. She produces the kind of financial details and insights we wish we were consistently creating for our clients. She has her head wrapped around every single piece of how our business works. Her wisdom and insights have been a guiding force for years now and she's a key reason for our success."
- Brittany Brown, Founder & CEO, LedgerGurus



Liz Scott

Four Counts In, Four Counts Out

How one technologist turned a three-day work week, a grandmother's memory, and a single word into a whole philosophy of living.

Everyone knows the version of Liz Scott who lives in the apps — the technology consultant, the automation trainer, the woman who can vanish into a workflow and resurface with a faster way to get the work done. What they miss is why. Every efficiency she builds gets bought back as time, and time is the one thing she refuses to waste. She learned that at seventeen, when she lost the grandmother who had been everything to her. She learned it again in 2020, when she poured herself into panicked clients until she lost sight of her own family. So she got a tattoo. One word: intentional. Then she built a life to match it.

Ask her peers, and they will say the same thing: Liz is the tech person. She is the one who connects the apps, brings AI into the workflow, and teaches firms how to automate the work they have always done by hand. All of that is true. It is also, she will tell you, the least interesting thing about her.

"I don't want to be known as the technology person," she says. "I want to be known as the person who helped find humanity, technology is the tool to get there just like a wooden spoon is a tool to stir a pot of stew."

That is the architecture underneath everything she builds. Ask Liz why she keeps chasing faster tools, and she will not start with the tools. She will start with the mother who wants to be with her children more, the business owner who built a company to support a family, and the awareness that time is already ticking by whether we are paying attention or not. "My end goal," she says, "is to actively participate in the life I choose."

Those instincts trace back to monumental loss. At seventeen, Liz was an only grandchild, and her grandmother was, in her words, part mom, part grandma, the person she measured herself against. When she died. When she died. Liz was devastated, knocked off course from being what she calls a productive human. What she found on the other side was a conviction she has never put down: time expires whether you spend it on purpose or not.

"Time was a resource I needed to use wisely," she says, "and that resource was my life."

When her children came, the belief turned concrete. Leaving them with someone else just to go make money felt backward. If she had to be away, she wanted the fewest hours for the most dollars — and streamlining, automation, sustainability, words that can sound like jargon, became deeply personal. They meant getting back to the life she actually wanted.

She saw the same math playing out in the entrepreneurs around her, her own family included, people building careers that pulled them out of their homes. Liz believed accounting should answer the question that made the sacrifice worth it: is the effort ROI in the positive? Her first job in the field disappointed her because the work stopped at compliance but did not help the client build a better life. To Liz, that felt like leaving the most important question unanswered.

So she kept chasing tools that gave time back. That curiosity took her on the road with Intuit, teaching QuickBooks master classes across the country, sometimes six cities a month. She loved teaching. She didn't love how far it pulled her from the mission that started it all. When COVID ended the travel in 2020, relief cut through the upheaval.

Then 2020 asked for more. Her phone filled with business owners in tears — how do I keep the doors open, how do I feed my family, how do I keep the house? Liz answered every call. And answered. And answered. By the end of that



year, she realized she'd poured herself into other people's survival until she'd drifted far from her own mission.

Her grandfather used to tell her the mother is the most important person in a family — if she isn't mentally and physically well, it's harder for anyone else to be. In 2020, that lesson landed hard. Caring for everyone else while neglecting herself was not sustainable, no matter how useful she was being.

"Never again," she decided, "will I spin my wheels and lose focus of who I am."

She made it permanent: Intentional, tattooed on her arm. She loves other people's tattoos and can never commit to her own, because she's always evolving. This one she committed to, because underneath the evolving is a fixed core: be mindful of what's limited — time, money, energy, health — and spend it on purpose.

By 2023, that word had a new resolution: a three-day work week.

It arrived in stages. First a four-day week, Fridays set aside to work "on the business instead of in it," though what those Fridays actually needed was a pen, paper, and a set of hard questions. Mondays became planning days, the house quiet before the week could organize her instead. Tuesday through Thursday held the desk work. Saturday and Sunday, she was fully present, which she calls the hardest discipline of all.

"Accountants and entrepreneurs struggle with being present with their family," she says. "They struggle with setting that piece of their brain down at the desk, and then actually being with the most important people doing the things we love most."

None of it made her less ambitious. Income held. Productivity held. What changed was intention, and everything that grew from it. The four days away from formal work aren't empty; they're the recovery that lets her bring focus to the three days she works.

In early 2021, with the world still strange and shut in, Liz and her family hit the road and went camping, what she calls the 3D world: unplugged, present, out in nature. Yoga came in to recover the muscles, and yoga opened onto sound baths, where the brain detoxes into instrumental sound and the heart can regulate itself against a drum. In those circles she met people who practiced breath work, and they became dear friends.

Breath work wasn't new to her, she'd learned to regulate it on the track team, watched her own kids learn it for band. What was new was practicing it on purpose, for her health, and then seeing how directly it fed her work. When she trains a room of overwhelmed accountants, she watches for the moment tension steals their ability to absorb anything new, and brings them back to the body: breathe, move, let the nervous system settle enough for the brain to listen again.

It's the same logic behind The 'Appy Hour, the education platform she built with Heather Day. The idea came from watching accountants relax at a bar after conferences and finally talk honestly with app developers about their real problems. The 'Appy Hour brought that premise into the classroom: relax first, then learn.

Right about when Liz wondered if she'd taken automation as far as it could go, AI arrived. By the end of 2024, automation had let her business run with five fewer team members, not because cutting people was the goal, but because better systems were. Now she's chasing something bigger: what she calls AI Financial Advisory Dashboard Consulting, the question that disappointed her at her first accounting job finally answerable — what can the numbers based on all the data points tell a business owner about what to do next?

Picture an e-commerce business whose QuickBooks file tells only part of the story. AI can pull together ad spend, sales channels, inventory, and the ledger into one place, so the owner sees not just whether the books reconcile, but whether a campaign is paying off, or whether a product with fifteen days of inventory and a twenty-eight-day replenishment cycle needs its ads turned down before it sells past zero. That's the level of decision-making Liz believes small businesses have been missing.

If more of month-end close automates itself, she argues, compliance can't be the finish line anymore. The profession has the opportunity to answer the long standing question, how do make the most of my time spent in the business. Her answer is advisory, not as a buzzword, but as human connection: helping a client see where their time, money, and attention will do the most good.

"Never again," she decided, "will I spin my wheels and lose focus of who I am."

Liz Scott

Her family has noticed her joy and excitement for live return after a long season of too many hours spent at her desk solving other peoples live. They know she needs the outlet for her creativity and desire to share with others and they know they count on her presence of mind to be with them in off hours. Mondays and Fridays, she's there, for the doctor, for school, for the cooking that's a real priority in a house that takes turns at the stove.

Where she is headed now bends toward the body and the ground: more gardening, more herbs grown and cooked with for the people she loves, and certifications outside her profession that would let her do more of that work. It all circles back to a question she first asked at 17 and has never put down: when she is gone, will people remember the values she believed in? If she does not live those values now, she knows, they will not be seen if they were not demonstrated..

Her advice for anyone running flat out and afraid to slow down is plain, and she wants it on the record: it isn't soft. Athletes use breath work. Special ops team use it before and after missions. Musicians use it. People use it before they walk onto a stage. A few deliberate breaths can calm the nervous system and supply needed oxygen to make the next hard thing easier to meet. Move. Walk. Stretch. The method doesn't matter. What matters is remembering that a body and a brain have to be protected if you expect them to sustain your ambitions.

Four counts in. Four counts out. Slow down enough to speed up.

"My motivation for technology is actually to become more human," Liz says. She wants to spend the least time working that she can, so she can spend more of her life with what matters. That's who she is at the core. The apps, the AI, the automation, those are just the tools for getting back there.

It's not woo-woo to slow down and take a breath. Calming the body to let the brain do its best work is science. Her message to all is apply the science so you can live the most impactful intentional life.



"Liz Scott is intensely curious and all about squeezing the most out of life. She once brokered the opportunity to see flesh-eating beetles at work with a client as part of her engagement terms. Whatever she does, she's all in and intent on learning everything she can about it. And she always does it with a sprinkle of glitter and a dash of pink." ***- Heather Day, Director of Education and Media, Woodard***



Jessica Morrissey

This Is Exactly Where We're Meant to Be

She planned every inch of the home she and her husband rebuilt from the studs out. Somehow, through fire, flood, and a hurricane that crushed everything around it, the house itself never took a hit.

Jessica Morrissey did not expect a hurricane to become the origin story of her home renovation. But when the storm tore across her family's six acres outside Houston, it landed a tree directly on the RV where Jessica, her husband, and their two daughters had been living, crushing it in the exact spot where the family would normally have been. They were not there. A friend's invitation to what she calls a "hurricane party" had pulled them away for the night, and the storm hit the next day instead.

They came back to find it gone.

Her husband called her from the property, over FaceTime, and told her the RV was completely totaled. The tree had landed right in the middle of it, in the space where the family would normally have been gathered, cooking, doing homeschool lessons, just existing. "If we hadn't stayed at a friend's house, I don't know what would have happened," Jessica says.

The RV had been their home for just over a year by the time the hurricane hit, a stopgap between the life Jessica and her husband left behind and the one they were building. The couple, originally from a small town in upstate New York with, in Jessica's words, "maybe one blinking yellow light," had moved to the outskirts of Houston and found the traffic and density overwhelming. They missed trees. They missed privacy. So when they found six acres at the end of a dirt road, with a creek running along the property, they saw possibility even though the house itself was, by Jessica's own assessment, "beat down," with no heating or cooling and barely a livable interior.

It took three visits back to the land before Jessica let herself believe they could take it on. "I was like, nope, 100 percent, we can't do it," she remembers of that first walkthrough. "I can't even get a vision here for this home." But the acreage kept pulling them back, and eventually the vision arrived: turn porches into rooms, tear out walls, replace nearly everything but the shell. They bought the property a little over three years ago, and bought an RV so they could live on site while they worked.

For a family of four, that meant real compromise. The RV had a bunk room for the two girls and a separate bedroom for Jessica and her husband, but the bathroom was, in her words, tiny, and cooking became an exercise in improvisation: meal prepping at the table because there wasn't counter space, working around an oven barely big enough for "the smallest pan you could find." They started homeschooling in that cramped space too, in the middle of tearing down and rebuilding an entire house around them.

Just over a year into living in the RV, the hurricane came. Beyond the RV, a second casualty sat nearby: a moving trailer packed with furniture, couches, and family photos, everything they weren't yet using in the house, crushed in the same storm. And yet the house itself, still gutted, still mid-renovation, came through untouched. Trees fell





on both sides of it. Not a branch touched the structure. "It seems like we're still meant to be doing this," Jessica remembers thinking in that moment, even as she stood facing the fact that her family, for the second time, had nowhere to live.

They moved in with her in-laws, who were, coincidentally, mid-move themselves. For two months, the young family had the run of a spacious house within easy reach of the property. Once her in-laws relocated too, the household grew fuller, and juggling homeschooling with the push to finish the renovation became, in Jessica's words, "a kick in the pants," a pressure that sharpened the family's urgency to finish.

A year and a half after buying the land, they moved in. The whole family slept on mattresses in the living room that first night, deliberately, Jessica says, to make it feel like an occasion. "We're all finally camping out in our house," she remembers thinking. "It just felt amazing. Like, I can't believe this is really happening."

What followed was months of a renovation defined less by contractors and more by Jessica's own hand, room by room. She designed the placement of every outlet, every light switch, every fixture in the house herself, working out each room like a puzzle: where the desks would sit, and therefore where the plugs needed to be; which way a door would swing, and therefore which wall needed the switch; where the television would hang, and therefore where the high and low outlets belonged. The office, still not entirely finished, is the room she points to as proof the vision worked: desks for her daughters' homeschooling, a shelf as a divider, a back wall of built-in bookshelves, and a reading nook she describes simply as cozy and warm.

She and her husband built those shelves together, from a photo Jessica had shown him: cutting the wood outside, him at the saw, her sanding, measuring against the height of actual books to get the spacing right, holding pieces steady so the other could screw them into place, then finishing the priming and painting side by side. It is the kind of division of labor that shaped the whole renovation. Demolition fell mostly to the two of them, but they didn't do it alone. Over the three years of the renovation, family and friends rotated in for different projects: the roof, the siding, cutting up trees after the storm, hanging sheetrock, laying the floor. Jessica painted seven of the home's rooms herself and brought in help to paint five others. What they hired out otherwise was mostly specialty work, electrical, plumbing, cabinet installation, the jobs that needed steady hands during the hours her husband was at his full-time job.

Demolition, Jessica says, was the most physically demanding part of the process: whoever built the house originally had used unusually solid materials, and tearing any of it out took real labor. The harder toll, though, was less physical than temperamental. "I'm somebody who really likes things clean and tidy and in its place," she says, and living inside an active renovation, mess on mess with no clear end date, tested that instinct daily. "When can I clean it, and when can things look normal? That wore on me the most."





The payoff shows up in details she still notices. The couple tore out the original ceilings and raised them throughout the house, turning what had been dark, paneled, and enclosed into something light, warm, and peaceful, her own words for the feeling she was chasing the whole time. The kitchen island marks the distance traveled most clearly: where she once mixed birthday cake batter balanced on RV cushions and hunted for utensils under couch cushions, she can now spread every ingredient across one surface and find everything exactly where she left it.

The hurricane, it turns out, was not the only close call. An electrical outlet caught fire right outside the house at one point, a risk Jessica says could have burned the whole structure down. Her husband was burning brush another time when the flames crept toward the house and he had to hose it out before it spread. A flood reached the garage but never made it inside. Add that to a hurricane that crushed everything on either side of the house while leaving the structure itself standing, and Jessica has stopped calling it luck. "I feel like we've endured all of this," she says, "but this is exactly, like, where God wants us to be. There's so many times it could have been destroyed, but it hasn't."

There is still work ahead: a master bathroom, a half bath, moldings, a kitchen backsplash, light fixtures waiting to be hung, and decorating that Jessica admits she is oddly dreading after so many months spent planning every last outlet. But when she talks about why any of it mattered, the renovation and everything that threatened it, she comes back to her daughters. "I guess that we did this all for them," she says. "That they could have a childhood where they can grow up feeling free and not confined, where they have all the space to play and do all the things they want to do." It is the reason six acres at the end of a dirt road became worth the fire, the flood, the hurricane, and the year and a half it took to make it home.

"This is exactly where we're meant to be," Jessica says. "That's been amazing."



Jessica has been a steady hand in our accounts receivable department throughout her time with the company. When her manager unexpectedly left earlier this year, Jessica stepped up to take on several additional responsibilities and helped keep the department moving forward. She also identified gaps in our systems and brought us thoughtful ideas for strengthening our processes. Jessica consistently models our core value of pursuing excellence. — ***Alex Suber, Chief Operating Officer, ChurchCandy Marketing, LLC***



Terri Warren

From Banana Hats to Flight Lines

A self-described "girly" Georgia teenager enlisted in the Navy at nineteen with no real plan and no idea she would end up inside the engine of a P-3 aircraft. What she found there was a version of herself she hadn't met yet.

Terri Warren was five foot three and barely a hundred pounds. She liked cute outfits, skirts, heels, and dancing. She had a soft Southern accent that stood out the moment she opened her mouth. Nothing about her, at least on the surface, said aviation electrician. And for a long time, other people's perceptions had a way of making Terri question what she was capable of, too.

That began to change in aviation electrician school in Millington, Tennessee, because of a test she failed. Terri knew the material. She could read the schematics. She understood the principles of aviation and electrical systems. Put the problem in front of her, and she could work it. Put the same information on a written exam, though, and something changed.

She failed.
It could have confirmed every insecurity she carried; instead, an instructor who had watched her work saw something the test didn't. He built a physical board test, an electrical setup that recreated the exam scenarios, and asked Terri to demonstrate what she knew rather than write it down.

She passed.
Terri hadn't suddenly gotten smarter. She discovered that failing at something and being incapable of doing it were two very different things. "It's just having somebody else believe in me, having somebody else challenge me, that actually gave me the courage to challenge myself even further," she says.

It became one of the defining lessons of her Navy years: not knowing how to do something yet didn't mean she couldn't figure it out. And the Navy gave her plenty of opportunities to prove it.

Her decision to enlist had been surprisingly casual. A friend was joining and asked if she wanted to go along. "I didn't have anything else going on," Terri remembers. "Sure, why not."

She had wanted to be a photographer, but that billet wasn't available. A recruiter handed her a list of other jobs.

Admin sounded boring.
Aviation electrician sounded hard.

"That one sounds more fun than sitting behind a desk," she said.

At nineteen, she had no idea how far that offhand choice would take her. Basic training in Orlando came first, in the dead heat of August. For a girl accustomed to dressing up, the dungarees, combat boots, and marching all day were a bit of a culture shock.



Then there were the "banana hats," curved black caps that protected one strip of her forehead while leaving the rest of her face and neck to burn in the Florida sun. It was funny. It was miserable. And Terri looked and sounded nothing like what people expected.

She was teased and underestimated for being short. Her Southern accent sometimes added to the assumption that she wasn't as smart as she actually was. She felt out of place and, oddly, somewhat invisible. But the tiny girl with the Southern accent kept going.

After school, she was stationed in Brunswick, Maine, working on P-3 aircraft. The work was technical, physical, and occasionally absurd. Maine winters required so much cold-weather gear that Terri says she looked like the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man. She worked inside wheel wells with freezing hands and stood on icy flight lines where the wind could literally slide her across the ground.

She calls it "frigidly fun."

She also discovered that being five foot three had at least one advantage in aviation maintenance: she could fit places other people couldn't. Terri learned to wire aircraft, troubleshoot electrical systems, read schematics, and hunt down problems buried inside machines far larger than she was. She could even climb inside the engine of a P-3, a place she occasionally used as her own little hiding spot when she wanted a few quiet minutes.

The girl who once seemed completely out of place had found a place where she belonged, even if sometimes it was literally inside an airplane engine. The Navy took her well beyond Maine. Her squadron deployed across five countries, and Terri spent two months in Puerto Rico and time on Ascension Island, where green mountaintops gave way to black volcanic rock and beaches covered in dark sand.

It also gave her something else she hadn't expected: her husband.

He was a flight engineer, six-foot-three and built like the football player he had once been, which made him a fairly ridiculous physical match for five-foot-three Terri. Their shops were connected, and their relationship began with a running game of writing "Tag, you're it" on each other's chalkboards. Eventually, chalkboard tag turned into actual conversation.

He carried around an Igloo cooler full of VHS tapes and invited her over to watch a movie. They chose Splash, the movie about the mermaid. More than 35 years later, the story is still being told.

So is Terri's description of their Navy relationship: "He flew the planes and broke them. I fixed them." But military life eventually asked something of Terri that was harder than cold flight lines, electrical schematics, or any exam.

It asked her to repeatedly leave her child.

Once, she received just 48 hours' notice that she would be gone for two months. She scrambled to arrange care for her young son while trying to explain something a toddler couldn't possibly understand: Mom was suddenly going to disappear for a very long time.



She missed his third birthday. More than three decades later, that still hurts. Friends on base helped care for him. Terri and her family stayed connected through letters, art projects, and videos carried back and forth on military planes. Once a week, when she could, she called home through a special phone line.

Then came another deployment, this one expected to last six months. Leaving her little boy again was heartbreaking. There was no good way to explain months of absence to a child who only understood that his mother was there one day and gone the next. Then, in one of those strange turns life sometimes takes, Terri got her thumb caught in the roller of an aircraft ladder.

She broke it badly enough to require surgery. For an aviation electrician, a broken thumb was decidedly bad news. For a mother facing six months away from her little boy, it was something much more complicated. The injury kept her stateside longer. Instead of leaving her son with family as planned, she went back to get him.

Eventually, those moments forced Terri and her husband to ask a bigger question. They had proven they could handle military life. But did they still want to? "We just decided we didn't want that type of lifestyle," she says. Walking away required another kind of courage.

Neither had a carefully mapped-out civilian career waiting. Leaving also meant losing something they hadn't fully appreciated until it was gone: the built-in community, friendships, and camaraderie of military life. They moved south, closer to Terri's family in Georgia. Her husband found steady work. Terri eventually found her way into accounting.

For years, Terri described what the Navy gave her with one word: resilience. And it did.

But looking back, the lesson may have been bigger than that. The Navy taught her not to confuse "I haven't done this before" with "I can't do this."

A nineteen-year-old girl from Georgia walked into basic training wearing a banana hat, combat boots, and an accent people underestimated. She walked out of the Navy knowing how to troubleshoot an aircraft, survive a Maine flight line, adapt when plans changed overnight, leave when something no longer fit the life she wanted, and start again without knowing exactly what came next.

She also walked out with the six-foot-three flight engineer who had been writing "Tag, you're it" on her chalkboard. More than 35 years later, he is still beside her.

"He's my rock," Terri says. "He's my hero who consistently believed in me and put up with my sassiness."

But somewhere along the way, Terri learned to believe in herself, too.

The nineteen-year-old who joined the Navy because she "didn't have anything else going on" couldn't have known what that decision would give her: a career she never expected, a husband she would build a life with, experiences that would shape the way she led and, perhaps most importantly, evidence that she could walk straight into unfamiliar territory and figure it out.

She has been doing it ever since.



"Terri cares deeply about the people she works with, and the processes are how she shows it. She wants things to run smoothly so that the team works more smoothly and have less stress. She loves seeing them thrive, and brings joy and laughter to the work we do." – ***Carla Caldwell, Founder CEO, Caldwell Consulting & Training | Candella Accounting & Advisory Services***



Milli Bruce

I Do Belong Here

Milli found in welding what her logical, plan-it-all-out life rarely allows: the freedom to build one piece at a time and trust the next.

Milli Bruce says yes to almost everything, but it took her friend years of asking before she agreed to join Flaming Lotus Girls, a women-led collective that builds towering, fire-breathing kinetic sculptures for Burning Man. Every year, the invitation came. Every year, she had a reason to decline. Wednesdays weren't good for her. She was busy. There was always something.

What finally got her in the door wasn't the art itself. It was a promise: they would teach her to weld.

"I always thought that would be a really cool skill to be able to say that I could do," Milli says. That, combined with the fact that she was already headed to Burning Man that particular year, tipped the answer from no to yes.



She remembers the first time she picked up a torch with unusual clarity. It was loud. Louder than she expected, and a little frightening in a way that also felt powerful. She learned to tack weld first, laying down a tiny bead just to hold two pieces of metal together, before moving on to the real seam. Welders compare that motion to handwriting, a flow you have to find in your hand and trust.

Her first attempt was rough. Her second wasn't.

"I remember doing it, and the first one was really bad," she says. "And then the second one, I was like, that is so pretty, and I did that."

It didn't take her long to get the hang of it. She'd later learn something that stuck with her: women, she was told, tend to make especially good welders because of finer motor control. Whether or not that's the reason, Milli found something in the torch that felt less like a tool and more like a rhythm. "It felt almost like dancing," she says.

Within a relatively short time, she went from someone who didn't know how to weld to someone teaching others. She loved it. Passing the skill along meant someone else got to feel, for the first time, what she'd felt the moment her second bead came out clean.

But learning to weld inside Flaming Lotus Girls meant something beyond the craft itself. The collective is explicitly women-driven, though men are welcome, so long as they abide by an unwritten rule: never take a tool out of someone's hands. It exists, Milli says, because men would sometimes step in uninvited to show a woman "the right way" to do something she already knew how to do.

Outside that shop, in the other male-dominated spaces she's moved through over the years, whether in sport or at work, that instinct to second-guess her own place has been harder to shake.

"It really challenges your confidence," she says. "And like, having to go: no, I do belong, I am allowed here, and I do get to take up space in this space."

That belief, hard-won inside a welding shop, is the thread that runs under everything else in Milli's story.

The piece she's proudest of is a sculpture called Brazen, one of three giant fireflies her collective built together, alongside two others named Metric and John. (John is, by universal agreement within the group, a girl. Her name is still John.) Milli started with Brazen's wings and, once she'd built real ownership over that part of the piece, pushed to take the face through to completion too.

There was no manual for any of it. She looked up pictures of real fireflies, took stock of whatever raw material the group had on hand, and figured out, piece by piece, how to make something that didn't exist yet look like it belonged in the world.

The scale of the commitment is easy to undersell. The idea for a new sculpture typically starts forming as early as November, with the real



work ramping up by March or April, building toward a hard deadline: the last week of August, when Burning Man begins. In the final stretch, Milli was spending twenty to twenty-five hours a week in the shop, after a full day of work, often twelve-hour days on weekends. At the time, she was self-employed as a personal trainer, working with clients in the mornings and evenings and disappearing into welding in between. She and her collective mates once did the math on what all those volunteer hours were worth against the free festival ticket they received in exchange. They decided not to finish that calculation.

As the project matured, so did her role. Milli became the installation project lead, arriving on the playa a week early to help set the very first stake in the ground, then managing as many as fifty volunteers as the week went on, constantly fielding one question: Milli, what can I do? It meant reading people's skill levels and attention spans in real time, finding ways to keep them engaged so they'd come back the next day. "Very exhausting," she says, "and also very rewarding."

The first time she saw Brazen fully assembled and lit up on the playa, fire moving along its body, she was, in her own words, lost for words. Pride, but also something closer to wonder: the strange thrill of stepping back from months of close, intricate work and seeing the whole shape land. Her mother came to that Burning Man and saw the piece Milli had built, which added, she says, an extra layer she hadn't expected.

The skills didn't stay in the shop. Milli has since used what she learned to fix things at home, including replumbing the gas line on a new dryer herself, complete with a trip to the hardware store where she confidently rattled off the names of every fitting she needed. She did the whole job with a long set of acrylic nails





still on.

"I felt extra badass doing it," she says. "And it worked. I was so proud."

That contrast, girly and capable, delicate and industrial, is one she's come to enjoy rather than resolve.

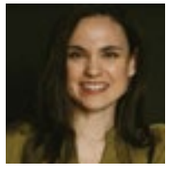
By 2022, though, the same intensity that made the work meaningful had also worn her down. That year's project asked more of a smaller group of people carrying the load, and Milli, working full time by then with far less flexibility than before, felt the burnout catch up with her. She hasn't welded since, though she's careful to call it a break rather than an ending. The door, she says, is always open. Members of the collective are currently touring past pieces, and she could show up and help anytime.

What's kept her from it isn't disinterest. It's the same challenge most people carrying full lives understand: making the time and actually protecting it. "I need to make it a priority," she says, "and make it happen."

If she picked the torch back up tomorrow, she has two ideas already waiting. One is another organic creature made unexpectedly out of metal, something soft-looking built from something hard. The other is smaller and more personal: a metal frame for a dining table, topped with a beautiful slab of wood, an art piece she made herself, living permanently in her own home.

Milli doesn't call herself an artist. Friends and colleagues, watching the color she brings into her house and her life, tend to disagree. But she's not especially interested in winning that argument. What she wants, more than the label, is for other people to go find their own version of what welding gave her.

"Not to do it to be good at it," she says, "but to do it because it's good for our souls."



"Beyond any title on her business card, what inspires me most about Milli is the quiet, undeniable strength she brings to our conversations at industry events. She walks into accounting spaces fully owning her worth, showing a rare blend of bold self-belief and genuine humility that I deeply admire. Knowing her has shown me that true leadership in any capacity is about knowing you belong at the table and showing up ready to execute. She has made an incredible impression on me simply by being a fiercely capable, grounded force whose character speaks entirely for itself." – ***Lynnette Oss Connell, Burnout Bestie at Reinspired Leadership Consulting LLC***



Melody Haney

Finding Her Way Back to the Game

Before she was a mother building a quieter life outside Houston, Melody Haney spent seventeen years chasing a sport that once tried to take itself away from her, and the two months she couldn't walk taught her exactly who she was without it.

Melody doesn't talk about soccer much these days. She works in marketing from her home outside Houston, splits her time between client calls and a two-year-old son, and the seventeen years she spent on a soccer field rarely come up in conversation anymore. "We're so far removed from college that it just doesn't come up," she says. But before the marketing job, before her son, before any of it, soccer was the thing that built her, broke her, and then built her back again.

She was five years old when she started, trailing her neighbors onto a field because they made it look like the most exciting thing in the world. Her first practice, she was too nervous to get out of the car. It took her mom several tries. But by her first real game, something shifted. She scored her first goal and looked over to see her dad jumping up and down on the sideline. "It was a feeling that could not be matched with anything else in my life at that point," Melody says, "and even up until I finished playing."

She played forward first, the position built for scoring, before a coach who wasn't even hers pulled her aside one day and told her flatly: "She's not a defender. You need to put her in the middle." By ten, Melody had found her home at center mid, the position she'd play for the rest of her career, through travel teams, through ECNL, through high school and eventually college.

By her freshman year of high school, she was playing about five hours of soccer a day between her national travel team, a Division One club, and her high school squad. There wasn't much conversation back then about overtraining or recovery. Melody just played through what she could tolerate, and she could tolerate a lot. "I am a tough cookie," she says. "I can take a lot. I don't normally crack."

So when a dull ache settled into her lower back, nobody thought much of it at first, least of all Melody. It didn't respond to ice, heat, or the stretches her trainers gave her. Her mom took her in for an X-ray. Nothing. Then another, and another, four in total, and still nothing showed up. One doctor floated kidney stones. Another, watching a teenage girl describe pain that wouldn't let up, quietly asked her mother



if Melody was "mentally okay." The unspoken suggestion: that she was making it up. That it was growing pains. That she was just a girl.

For two to three months, Melody played on a fractured spine that no one could find. In games, if she took a hit, she'd go down and simply couldn't get back up. At school, getting out of her desk chair meant sliding out hunched over, taking thirty or forty seconds just to stand up straight enough to walk to her next class. "I felt like I was ninety years old," she says.

It was an MRI, and eventually a visit to an orthopedic back specialist, that finally found it: fractures in her L4 and L5 vertebrae. "I don't know how people could have missed this," the specialist told her. "It's clear as day."

The diagnosis meant an immediate stop. No soccer, not in games, not in practice, not at all. For a fourteen-year-old who had spent her entire life on a field, the silence was its own kind of injury. She sat in the stands and watched her team practice without her. She watched them play games she couldn't be part of. "I am the soccer girl," she remembers thinking. "That's my life. That's who I'm supposed to be. That's my jam."

For a while, she genuinely didn't know if she'd play again, or if she even wanted to. What if she got hit again? What would that mean for her body, for her goals of playing in college, maybe even professionally? The recovery stretched to nine months in total, including two months of bed rest, before she slowly rebuilt her strength from the ground up.

Somewhere in that stretch, something clicked. She decided she wanted to prove she could come back, not just return to the field, but reach the goals she'd set before any of this happened. The work that followed, months of physical therapy and strength training, was slow and deliberate. When she finally stepped back onto the field for the first time, she was terrified. It never gave her trouble again.

"It was the most exhilarating experience," Melody says of that comeback. "It felt like so much freedom, because I was finally back into something I truly loved, and I could be my full self." She describes it simply: "Everything just felt right in my world." Every doubt she'd carried about whether soccer was still meant for her went quiet.

She came back sharper than before, not just physically but in how she carried herself. By the time college recruiters came calling, she had five or six offers on the table, from Division Two, Division One, and NAIA programs. Melody had been certain she'd never leave Texas. Schools from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and South Carolina reached out anyway.



A teammate's excitement about her own commitment to John Brown University, a small NAIA school in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, eventually led its coach to scout Melody at a game. At first, she resisted the idea. NAIA felt small, maybe too small, and she worried people would assume she wasn't good enough for Division One. Her parents pushed her to just visit before deciding anything.

That visit changed her mind entirely. The campus was, in her words, the most beautiful place she'd ever seen. Classes topped out around twenty-seven students. She loved the coach, loved the team, and loved that the school's faith and her own could sit alongside her soccer instead of competing with it. Ninety percent of her tuition was covered. Two months later, she committed, as a junior in high school, and felt something settle in her for the first time in years: peace.

It was at that same school, in the same freshman dorm, that she met her husband, Conner. Fraternizing between the men's and women's teams was technically against the rules, which made it almost inevitable that she'd notice him. She first spotted him on a team bus, during an initiation ritual that had every freshman sing a cappella into a set of noise-canceling headphones. Conner rapped "White and Nerdy." She thought he was cute and told herself, firmly, that it didn't matter.

It mattered. They grew close through mutual friends before either of them said anything out loud, until her own mother pointed him out at a game, and a teammate's crush on him forced Melody to admit she had feelings of her own. Their coaches eventually caught on and called them in for what turned out to be a fairly gentle conversation about keeping things respectful. They dated for the rest of college, pushing each other in training, trading bragging rights over which team won conference more often (hers, three years running), and building a relationship inside the same sport that had once nearly disappeared from her life.

They married in 2022 and moved to Houston, where they're now raising their son, a boy Melody describes as "crazy in all the best ways." Every year, they return to Arkansas for alumni games, and Melody brings him along to meet the friends and coaches who knew her back when soccer was still the center of everything. "It's been a surreal moment," she says.

Asked what she'd want her fourteen-year-old self, hunched over a desk chair and unsure if she'd ever play again, to know now, Melody doesn't hesitate long. She was a starter for all four years of college. She won awards. Her team beat nationally ranked opponents. None of it happened despite the injury; in some ways, it happened because of what the injury taught her about coming back from anything.

"We didn't give up when it got hard," she says. "I accomplished my dreams, and I met my husband doing it. I can do anything I set my mind to."



Melody originally joined our team in a different position, but we often use the phrase "right person, right seat." When the company needed her to step into a new seat, she embraced the opportunity without hesitation and has excelled in the role. Melody consistently models our core value of owning it through her willingness to take responsibility and do what the team needs.
— ***Alex Suber, Chief Operating Officer, ChurchCandy Marketing, LLC***



Lauryn King Darden

Twenty Years Later, She Still Knows Every Note

It took leaving Hampton University for Lauryn King Darden to fully understand what the marching band gave her: not just music, but a place she never had to be anyone but herself.

Lauryn King Darden picked the flute in fourth grade because it was the lightest instrument to carry home. Nearly two decades later, she still remembers every song she ever learned to play, the muscle memory left over from four years marching piccolo in Hampton University's band, a chapter so consuming it dictated her sleep, her meals, and her weekends for the better part of college. "It's almost twenty years later, and I still remember how to play certain songs," Lauryn says. But what she took from that experience was bigger than music. It was a discipline, a sense of pride, and a feeling of total acceptance that she says she wouldn't fully understand the value of until she left it behind.

Music runs in her family. Her mother played French horn. Her father played trumpet at Morgan State, another HBCU, and growing up, Lauryn watched A Different World, the sitcom about a fictional Black college that made attending an HBCU feel less like an option and more like an inevitability. What sealed it was Drumline. "I was like, I have to figure out how to go there," she says of watching the film's depiction of HBCU band culture.

Her parents had other ideas about where "there" should be. Clark Atlanta University, near Morehouse and Spelman College, was ruled out for distance. Howard University, in the middle of Washington, D.C., was ruled out after a friend's brother had his car carjacked in the city. Hampton, six hours from her home in New Jersey and set on the Virginia coast, split the difference: far enough to feel like her own life, close enough for her parents to reach in a single drive. The school even had a sailing team. Students and Alumni call it "our home by the sea."

The choice solidified the summer before her senior year of high school, when Lauryn attended a band camp on Hampton's campus and marched alongside students who would later become her actual classmates. "That's what kind of solidified it," she says. "This is a cool experience. I really enjoyed it." She arrived that fall already knowing a few faces, including her middle school best friend, who had been accepted to Hampton independently, without either of them planning it. They became roommates for the next several years. She was the matron of honor at Lauryn's wedding; Lauryn stood beside her at hers.

Discipline as a way of life

Freshman year in the band came with a list of rules that Lauryn still recites easily. Be fifteen minutes early to everything or run laps as punishment.



No shortcuts, meaning no walking in the grass and no taking elevators, only stairs. If an upperclassman spotted a freshman walking at practice, that freshman had to run laps. In each instrument section, hers being the piccolo section, all freshman players were required to stay together at all times, a rule she now understands as part bonding exercise, part protection in an unfamiliar place.

During band camp, rehearsals ran from roughly 8 AM until 9 -10 PM. Then once school started, it filled every weeknight from about 5 PM – 10 PM, and Saturdays were for football games and halftime shows. "I was in the best shape of my life," she says. She sometimes skipped dinner entirely, eating a cup-o-noodles alone in her room just to get a moment of solitude in a schedule that otherwise left none.

The standard for precision was unforgiving. Sectional rehearsals existed to catch anyone who wasn't playing exactly right, because in a band, one player out of step can undo the whole formation. "If everybody's wrong, one percent of the time, it's going to sound like a train wreck," Lauryn says. "You have to be very accurate and very together." Nobody wanted to be the reason it fell apart. By her junior year, she had become assistant section leader; by senior year, section leader, a role that required her to be excellent on her instrument and capable of leading a group of people who relied on



her to be both.

There were smaller rituals, too, ones that stuck. The band traveled by bus, five or six at a time, to games across the country. The road trip meals were reliably buffet stops at Shoney's or Golden Corral. "To this day I will not eat at a Golden Corral," she says. "I almost gag when I see one."

What it took to see it clearly

Lauryn describes the years immediately after graduation as a kind of quarter-life crisis, the sudden absence of structure leaving her unmoored in a way she hadn't anticipated. But the fuller reckoning came once she was working in public accounting, often as the only Black person on her team. "I definitely experienced microaggressions being in corporate America for almost fifteen years," she says. It wasn't always something she could name in the moment.

Things happened that "didn't make sense" to her, she says, before she came to understand them as microaggressions or unconscious bias. She noticed, too, that the way she naturally communicated, expressive and emotionally direct, read differently in a corporate setting than it ever had at Hampton. "That's not always accepted in corporate America," she says, describing a manager who seemed intimidated by traits she'd never had to hide before. "I had to figure out how not to be myself." It took years, she says, before she learned to bring her full personality back into her work.

What Hampton had given her, she's come to believe, was something particular to a Black student at a Black institution: a place to build confidence and identity without first having to explain or justify herself. "It's just something about being at that HBCU that helps you grow up and helps to nurture you in a way that I don't think I've experienced anywhere else," she says. It was going back to Hampton for homecoming, after she'd had that corporate experience, that the acceptance she'd known as a student came into full focus. "Going back to homecoming after working was when I really felt that acceptance and love," she says.



That recognition extended to how she thinks about HBCUs more broadly, and to a standard drilled into students well before graduation. Ahead of job fairs, students were expected to show up in full suits and pantyhose, hair done a certain way, polished well beyond business casual. "I went to interview at different companies for internships, and my colleagues from Hampton and I were normally the best dressed," she says. "I went to fight a ticket in court once, and they thought I was the lawyer." She's since come to understand why the standard existed, not because it reflected what most jobs actually required, but as armor against a bias she says Black professionals are often held to before they've even had the chance to prove themselves. "We shouldn't have to do all that to be accepted," she says, "but you can't act like everybody is all healed and forgiven and is going to see you equally. There's still bias. It still happens." It's a tension she's made peace with rather than resolved, and one she says Hampton equipped her to carry in a way she isn't sure any other school could have.



Twenty years on, Lauryn still returns for homecoming most years, piccolo in hand, rejoining alumni who remember the same dances and the same calls the current students are still learning. Her closest friendships from that era, including the one that started in middle school, have outlasted every year since. Looking back, she describes that whole chapter in a single word: freedom. No job yet, no children yet, just the discovery of who she was going to be.

What she wants people to take from her story isn't nostalgia. It's a case for keeping music programs alive in schools, the kind of programs that are often the first thing cut when budgets tighten. To her, band taught something no other class did: how to be excellent individually while never trying to outshine the people around you. "It's not okay to suck," she says. "You don't get a trophy because you just participated. You have to contribute and work well together." It's a lesson she still lives by, decades after she last marched onto a field, and one she hopes stays available to the next kid who picks up an instrument because it happened to be the lightest one to carry home.



"Lauryn is an incredibly caring person who truly takes the time to get to know you first so she can serve you better. She also has the uncanny ability to see the holes in a process, combined with the knowledge to identify risks and put effective measures in place to fix them." - ***Michelle Mitchell, CEO & Founder of Mitchell Consulting***



Monica Perez

On Point

A childhood in ballet, a solo in New York, and the walkout that ended it all. Monica Perez on what her body was never supposed to be worth.

Monica Perez was three years old the first time the floor answered back. Tap shoes, her sister beside her, a small girl learning she could make noise and be adored in the same breath. Fifteen years of ballet followed: point work, a custom white tutu heavy with rhinestones, a solo in New York, and a workshop with Mia Michaels. What almost no one knows is how it ended.

Not with a final bow, but with a door held open days before a competition, a spot left unfilled, a teenager choosing her sister over the stage she loved. "I left them high and dry," Monica says. She has regretted the leaving, and defended the reason, every day since.

The dancing started because sitting still was not an option. Her parents, Cuban, did not raise idle daughters. They were not chasing perfection or trophies; they wanted their girls moving, healthy, alive in their bodies. So the two sisters, Irish twins born less than a year apart and opposite in almost every way, were put in dance young and kept there. Monica was three. Her sister was four. They stayed in the same age bracket for years, which meant they were never separated, never pulled onto different teams.

"At the end of the day, you always have your best friend with you," Monica says. She was then. She still is.

Dance, in those early years, was noise and joy and the two of them side by side. It stayed that way until the studio split the fun classes from the competitive ones, the way youth sports separate rec ball from travel. Around ten, Monica started competing. By thirteen, she was in the serious bracket, the one with measured milestones and a single objective. "We're gonna go compete, and we have to be the best, and we have to look the best, and we have to dance the best," she says. Less chatter. Less ease. Still, she loved it, because she was dancing.

New York was the peak of it. She danced a workshop there with Mia Michaels, who she remembers as loud and fearless and wildly creative, a woman who could make a story exist in a body without a single word. "No BS, but we're here to have fun," Monica says. "Let's make it epic."

Her first solo competition was in that city, and it is the memory she reaches for first. A custom white tutu, rhinestoned and beautiful. Her father backstage beside her, because at the time she was closer to him than to her mother. He wore a pin, the kind given to the father of a ballerina, a small badge for a man who had daughters instead of sons to cheer at ballgames. Monica was third in line and certain she could not do it. The stage was too big. There were too many people.

She started to walk off.

Her dad pretended to trip her. "Get it together," he told her. "I am not wearing this pin for no reason."

So she went on. And then, mid-solo, in her head the way dancers get, she stepped on the back of her toe shoe and it slid off her heel. For one clean second she thought about running. She looked to the wings, where her father stood. He held her there with a look. Stay. You do it. So she stayed, and she improvised the rest of it, one foot on point, the other quietly not, because going up on a loose heel would have sent her to the floor. She finished. Then she froze in her final pose and would not leave, until a teacher gently told her she was welcome to exit the stage.

She was sure she had placed nowhere. Even her sister said it was terrible. Then they called second place, and it was her name.

"There's no way. That's the wrong person," she thought, and refused to go up. Then she went up. "Oh my god, this trophy is mine."

To this day, she will dance on any stage without fear. Tell her it is a competition, and she is right back in her head.

That is the version of the story that is easy to tell. There is another one running underneath it. Somewhere in the shift from fun to competitive, worth stopped being measured in talent and started being measured in bodies. The ideal was rigid: stick thin, overextended feet, hyperextended legs. Monica had the arched feet and the extended lines. She also had a different shape. "I am Latin," she says. Her sister had a different shape too.

The pressure was not abstract. A teacher would walk the barre during warm-ups, wall-to-wall mirrors on every side, and poke at the dancers with a safety pin where their bodies were judged too big. It stung when it was aimed at Monica. It cut deeper when it was aimed at her sister.

"I developed body dysmorphia," she says. "I didn't want to eat." Her Cuban parents put rice and beans in front of her and made sure she did. The habit of the mind was harder to feed. "Through high school and after, I was like, I can't take a sip of water because my belly's gonna bloat. You're in your head about it, and that was hard to get out of." She got out of it. Others never did. One girl she danced with is still very sick today, still convinced that thinness is the point, once found stretching into splits from a hospital bed because she could



not make herself stop.

The line Monica would not let anyone cross was her sister. Diabetic since around eight, her sister lived with blood sugar that could drop without warning, a shakiness that meant sit down, drink some orange juice, wait fifteen minutes. Once the studio turned competitive, that was recast as an excuse. Laziness. So Monica told her sister to ignore them and walk out, and she meant it literally. She would walk her sister to the door and open it. "Just go, and go get your orange juice. Who cares what she says." Her sister worried the studio would retaliate against Monica. Monica, who has always had the stronger personality, figured she could take whatever came.

Then came the competition she was supposed to headline, a solo, days out. The shaming of her sister had gotten bad. Monica quit. The head of the division tried to reason with her, told her she couldn't leave now, asked who would fill her spot. "Well, you have understudies," she said. "You'll figure it out." She was seventeen, maybe eighteen. She did not go. "I needed to hit where it hurts," she says, "because they were hitting me where it hurts."

She does not regret leaving that studio. She regrets quitting dance. "It weighs on me every day," she says. She should have taken it somewhere else, she thinks. She sees cheerleaders, sees the flexibility and the movement, and wonders who she might have become. Maybe better. Maybe a studio of her own. These days she dances anyway, Zumba, hip hop, nothing organized, catching the music where she can. And she tells the younger dancers in her life to think it through before they walk, because she knows the shape of that regret.

To a girl standing where she once stood, being told her body is the problem, she is unequivocal. "Stand your ground. Show your value in your performance, not in what you look like." Feel the story and reveal it through the moves. Do it because you love it, not to satisfy someone's expectations. And if a place is hurting you, leave it for another one, but do not let it take the dance itself.



"Monica never cared whether something fell within her job description. She started as my PA, became my EA, and worked her way up to Director of Operations because she was willing to learn anything and get her hands dirty right alongside me. She was my pit bull, my fireman, and usually the person standing next to me asking, "Okay, what are we fixing now?" Monica is mentioned throughout my book because if you know the story of my company, you know she was in the middle of it with me. Every successful business owner has someone who makes their success possible, and Monica was that person for me." – ***Sharrin Fuller, Founder & Strategic Advisor, Glass Wallet***

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