

20/20 Vision

20/20 Vision

*An Insightful Journey into
Joyful Living and Boundless Success*

ANDREA KULBERG, M. ED.



FORT WORTH, TEXAS

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For Princess Caitlyn and Sir Sean.

You are loved beyond words.

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Forward

I love to laugh when I'm not expecting to—like in church or in a corporate strategy session where the goal is inspiration, not entertainment. That's the best kind of humor, artfully hidden among serious messages.

Andrea Kulberg and I have always laughed together during breaks at the National Cheer Conference as well as during phone calls that keep us connected. She's a funny woman. As a writer, however, I know how hard it is to make someone laugh out loud while reading. And, frankly, I didn't think Andrea was that funny.

I was wrong.

20/20 Vision is, as its subtitle promises, “an insightful journey into joyful living and boundless success.” The life-affirming messages contained within its eighteen chapters offer fresh ideas with an aha-moment clarity. Punctuated with vignettes of her challenge-filled life, Andrea offers a candid look at the options she had in dealing with her disability and the choices she made along the way. We're talking legal blindness from her premature birth, the poverty years of her childhood, and a battle with cancer right after the birth of her first child. Her decision to be “better” rather than “bitter” permeates her serious message in *20/20 Vision*. Even having the privilege to know Andrea personally, I was riveted by her story and awed by her courage.

And, I still laughed out loud at some point in nearly every chapter!

Andrea takes her mission seriously, but not herself. You are going to love reading this book by Andrea. You'll find yourself learning from her, laughing with her, but never pitying her. Andrea's story is far from tragic—it is triumphant.

And, did I mention it's really funny?

—Gwen Holtsclaw, *author and founder and president of Cheer Ltd., Inc.*

Preface

A lot of people spend their entire lives looking for happiness and success. Some people think that happiness IS success. Some think success IS happiness. Some people believe the ultimate life victory is seeing their name on a large paycheck each month. Or they think it is about driving the right car or having the right friends or choosing the right career or having the right body. Whatever “right” is, anyway.

Hello? We have officially reduced ourselves to acting like a hamster in an exercise wheel. We spend precious time looking for something we have never truly defined. Or if we did define it, we have often based our definitions outside of reality. We spin our wheels and we endlessly run and run and run. We get all out of breath, but when we stop and think about it we get discouraged because we are still in the exact same spot from which we started. No wonder there are so many books about finding happiness and achievement!

The truth of the matter is that the joyful living and boundless success we are all looking for is a personal journey. It is not something we “get” one day while we select peaches in the produce aisle. Our happiness and success in life is a walk that wanders an infinite number of paths! Even with all those books out there, it is hard to

not get lost.

But why, at the ridiculously youthful age of 31, would I be such an expert that I have the right to flood the happy-and-successful book market even more? Who am I to tell you how to be a great leader who enjoys happiness and success when I was born three and a half years *after* man landed on the moon? Am I really the next Guru of You? Of course not! But I have been given the blessing of an amazingly unique perspective that sheds a welcome light on the ability to enjoy the gift of life.

As a severely visually impaired woman, I have had the opportunity to see the world with a vision I would have never known if I had perfect eyes. As a baby born nearly three months too soon, I learned that 2 lbs. 3 oz. of human being can produce several tons of perseverance. As an identical twin, I have learned to enjoy similarities and differences that are often overlooked. As one of six children, I have learned to speak up for myself. As a child of divorce with no idea how the next meal would get to the table, I learned to appreciate *everything*. As a world champion baton twirler, I learned to adapt to the impossible. (Can *you* close your eyes and catch a spinning metal projectile?) As a collegiate cheerleader, I learned to find passion in the everyday. As a cheerleading coach for teams around the world, I have learned the value of excellence in leadership. As a wife and mother, I have learned to love unconditionally. Finally, as a kidney cancer survivor, I have simply learned to live. So, what makes me an expert in leadership, happiness, and success? Life, that's what.

My sincere hope is that you immerse yourself in this book and apply the life lessons I have shared to your

unique circumstances. May you see the skills highlighted in each chapter as things you can choose for your own life. May you make the decision this very minute to wash away any doubt or sorrow or pain or fear, and instead, open your heart to a life changed for the better. Whether you lead a household, a sports team, a church organization, a group of volunteers, a team of employees, or a large corporation—the skills in this book will help you fully enjoy the process of becoming better at what you do. May you experience the pure joy of seeing with the 20/20 vision in this book. May it inspire your journey, motivate your mind, and open your eyes to a whole new perspective.

Here's to your new 20/20 foresight!

Andrea Kulberg

20/20 Vision

CHAPTER ONE

Shape the Circumstances or They Will Shape You

*“Only through experience of trial and suffering
can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared,
ambition inspired, and success achieved.”*

—Helen Keller

Hardships in life are like rainstorms. They sometimes come at unexpected times, they often come when it is most inconvenient, the thunder and lightening can scare the bajeezers out of you—and if you are not prepared—they can leave you soaking wet and cold. All-in-all, it does not sound like a lot of fun. But remember the rain is necessary for sustaining life and for new growth, too. And while you may not be in control of the rainstorms that happen “to you,” you are absolutely in control of your reaction to them. That is what will ultimately dictate your ability to overcome the rain and enjoy the sunshine.

When I was an infant, my mother noticed that my eyes were not as stable as my twin sister’s had become. Following her mother’s instinct, she took me to an ophthalmologist to be evaluated. After barely glancing at me, the doctor asked my mother if I was a premature

baby. When she answered yes, the doctor asked if I had oxygen in the incubator. Again, the answer was yes. Knowing excess oxygen can cause damage to the eyes, the doctor's response was more harsh than it was matter-of-fact. "Well, your daughter is blind."

I cannot imagine having to hear those words spoken about my child. It must have been positively unbearable at the time. But instead of having a meltdown that lasted my lifetime, Mom went to the bookstore to learn everything she could possibly learn about this disease called Retinopathy of Prematurity. Yes, she cried and grieved in a mother's anguish, but she also chose a positive and proactive response to the difficult situation.

She learned medical terminology and saw scientific pictures she never could have imagined having to know about. She learned about parenting a visually impaired child, and about resources and adaptive equipment and about ARD meetings at school. She learned about my rights in the education system and about her rights as a parent. She chose to become informed so that I might one day be independent. The knowledge she obtained on my behalf was endless.

Mom's decision to do those things was not easy or fun. It was very scary, in fact, to face so many unknowns. But it was necessary. Her personal response to what felt like a heavy burden in the beginning made her experience as a parent a positive and enlightening event for both of us. Not only did she learn to respond positively to challenges in life, but in observing her, so did I.

When I was in the seventh grade I announced to a group of friends that I was planning on trying out for

cheerleader. Usually that would be a good conversation starter at the lunch table but, because my friends obviously knew of my visual impairment, my plans left them dumbfounded. They truly did not know how to respond to my assumption that I could do such a thing as cheerleading! It was a moment that I hoped everyone would use to say I had a great idea or at least wish me good luck. But instead, everyone looked at me and nobody said anything at all.

The silence lasted for what felt like five minutes before an acquaintance flat-out dismissed the idea of a blind cheerleader. “You can’t be a cheerleader,” she said. “You can’t even see the chalkboard from the front row!”

Stunned, I held back tears and changed the subject. But as I had time to think about it, it became clear that I had a choice. I could choose to get angry and feel sorry for myself, or I could choose to prove that girl wrong. Not that I didn’t have the right to be hurt or angry—that was a natural human response. The question was how I would react *in addition* to my human response. Would I use the energy of hurt feelings and frustration to beat myself up or talk myself into not reaching for my dreams? Or would I use the energy to get over the ignorance of others and focus on the task at hand?

Perhaps the girl that doubted my potential was right and I would not become a great cheerleader. But then again, what if she was wrong? What if I *could* be a cheerleader? What if I could adapt to the circumstances of the sport? Who was she to predict the future? Who was she to dictate my dreams? Who was this kid—a *seventh-grader* who barely knew me—to say what I could or could not

overcome? And mostly, who was I to allow her to do that? This was my life, my dream, my choice, and my obligation to myself.

I made a conscious decision to try out for cheerleader that year. Even when I made the squad, I had no idea where it would take me. After all, it was “just” junior high cheerleading. It did not occur to me that I would cheer beyond high school. Never did I imagine being a part of the squad at the nation’s largest university cheering in a stadium with 80,000 people. Never did I imagine the opportunities to touch thousands of lives, yet I have coached kids from Texas to Denmark, England, Greece, Sweden, and back to Texas again. The day I made the cheerleading team in seventh grade, I *certainly* did not have the slightest inclination that I would have anything to do with it as a grown woman with two children!

But I can tell you this: it would have been a tragic loss of opportunity if I had allowed the circumstances of my visual impairment or the words of the kids at school to dictate my response to the challenge of seventh grade cheerleader tryouts. A moment that seemed so temporary and so minor as seventh grade cheerleading tryouts ended up being a life-changing moment. I’ve made lifelong friends, I’ve watched dreams come true, and I’ve watched countless people learn to believe in themselves. What a privilege!

Let’s not miss out on our privileges! The challenge is to not let the rainstorms of life—negative people or negative circumstances—get us soaking wet! I know it is hard to not fall into that trap. We see what “they” wear and spend our energy trying to emulate that. We see what

“they” drive and we admire that. Often, we have not even decided that our own mind is worthy of making our own decisions, so we even believe what “they” say. The things that make us feel good or included are absorbed as truth (even if they are false) and the things that make us feel bad have the power to pulverize our self-esteem. We spend time steering towards wherever everyone else is going rather than where we really want to go. What fun is life if we let everyone else do all the driving?

Are you a passenger? Even in simple matters, letting life drive you instead of the other way around can have dire consequences that will not allow you to fully experience joy and success. Have you ever gotten into a bad mood simply because someone around you is in a bad mood, slamming doors and huffing and puffing as he goes about his business? I have! But who is this John Doe to tell *you* to be in a grumpy mood just because *he is*? What right does Jane Doe have to convince you to spend *your* money on that very expensive (but fashionable!) wallet that you truly cannot afford? I’ll tell you what right she has. The right YOU GAVE HER. It might not feel like it is a choice, but it is. You will not be sent into fashion oblivion if you do not have that wallet.

As we face difficult people or situations, even in simple terms and everyday life, we must remember that we are in control of the response. Trials (and joys) in life can be divided or multiplied, depending entirely on how we react to them. In the battle between people and hardships, it’s not going to be a tie. One side or the other will win—the tough stuff or us. It might as well be us. Make it your choice to react positively with perseverance and a

will to win. Even if you don't win the first battle, keep at it. Eventually you will win the war, and, boy, will it feel good!

CHAPTER TWO

Give Better Than You Get

*“God has given us two hands -
one to receive with and the other to give with.”*
—Billy Graham

When I was eleven years old, my family was going through an extraordinarily difficult time. Newly divorced, my mother faced daily life supporting six children alone. My “Dad” (biologically, anyway) never paid child support, so my mother worked tirelessly to sustain our family. She was overwhelmingly aware that even when no checks came in the mail, there were still six kids to feed, six bodies to clothe, and six childhoods to protect. Mom seemed to work more hours than there were in the day, but sometimes there still was not enough money coming in.

One year as Christmas approached, it became clear that there would be no gifts under the tree. In fact, we didn’t even HAVE a tree. We had already bypassed Thanksgiving a few weeks earlier with no turkey and dressing. Instead, we had one box of Tuna Helper shared between seven people. I loved Thanksgiving and I had been sad to see the day come and go without sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie. But Christmas? Christmas without presents was going to be very hard.

When dawn broke on December 25th that year, there was no running downstairs to see what Santa brought. I knew there was nothing to open. Mom might have scraped together a few dollars here and there to buy something for each child, but even if she had, it would have been strange. We knew what a tremendous sacrifice even a small gift would have been.

I tried to focus on the real reason we celebrate Christmas and be thankful. I tried to be glad we had our family together. I tried to be just plain glad. But in all honesty, being eleven years old with no gifts under the tree made it hard to think past what I would have to tell my friends when they asked what I got.

I'll never forget how it felt to face the inevitable empty family room. I gathered my emotions as I padded downstairs in my pajamas. Hardly willing to look where I was going, I nearly tripped over the stacks of gifts that had been carefully stacked for each child. It was as if there were angels sitting among them! I could hardly speak. I knew these gifts had not come from resources within our family.

"Who gave us this?" I stammered incredulously. My brothers and sister, all equally astonished, asked the same. The room was filled with unbridled joy as my mother told us that some people from the church had donated gifts to our family.

"And they don't even know us?" I asked.

"No," came the response. "They just knew we needed help this year."

"But we don't even go to church!"

Yet, there we were on Christmas morning with a

room full of gifts—almost entirely from total strangers. God was working in my life before I even knew Him!

There are no words to express the gratitude my siblings and I felt that day. Even at such a young age, it was unimaginable that someone who did not know us would care enough to spend their time picking out gifts and spending their own money so that we could have presents to open on Christmas. They never got to hear how excited we were. They never got a thank you from us. They just gave because their hearts were good!

I am sure the gift-givers of that day have long forgotten about their generous acts. But I have not. I remember exactly what they gave us. I got a fluorescent sweatshirt with bright yellow suspenders and striped pants to match. Don't laugh! That was the big fashion hit of the early '80's! I also got a light pink sweatshirt that I adored. There was nothing to it but plain, simple pink. But it was new. And so soft! When I outgrew that sweatshirt, I cut the sleeves off and notched out the collar like a Madonna wannabe so I could wear it for another season. Every time I wore those clothes I thought of the strangers who gave them to me.

I have not forgotten how good it feels to receive generosity from others. As soon as I had money to give, I did. It was easy. And it was fun! Knowing how it felt on the receiving end of thoughtfulness, it was a joyful surprise to discover that it is even better on the giving end! I never would have imagined that to be possible, but it is. I can feel the joy exploding in my heart when I imagine what the recipient of my gift will feel.

This book is about happiness and success. The act

of giving time, talent, and money is absolutely key in that process. Make a specific point to give something—time, talent, and/or money—to someone. Read to a class of second graders at the local school. Teach an art class at a retirement home. Purchase groceries for a family in need. Trust me—if that family does not know where the next meal is coming from and a gift card for the local grocery store shows up in their mailbox, the gratitude they feel will be worth far more than the groceries. The food will nourish the body, but the gift of generosity and thoughtfulness will nourish the soul. And the joy that you feel will be absolutely priceless. So, go ahead. Find a need and aim to fill it with your heart. Sharing compassion and kindness is one of the biggest steps towards happiness and success you'll ever take.

CHAPTER THREE

Give the Gift of High Expectations

“If I accept you as you are, I will make you worse; however if I treat you as though you are what you are capable of becoming, I help you become that.”

—Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

There I stood, a young legally blind child, next to my fully sighted twin sister and four fully sighted brothers. Throughout my childhood, they followed the lead of my mother in making my blindness a virtual non-issue, which proved to be the single most important contribution to my ability to adapt. They didn't leave me to flounder in impossible situations or expect me to live in denial. But they did have expectations that I would figure out ways to adapt and function successfully in a sighted world.

If the last candy bar in the house was too high on the shelf for me to see, someone else in the family would gladly eat it on my behalf. If my brothers and sister were playing tackle football in the backyard, I would either learn to throw a decent spiral or not get picked for the team. And if they were better at hide-and-go-seek than I was, it was too bad for me. Don't read this as cruel sibling rivalry. This was nothing more than exactly what

I needed: Someone to expect that I could measure up to anyone else.

Hide-and-go-seek turned out to be a significant proving ground at our house. In the beginning, I had to be “it” more than my siblings did because I wasn’t very good at the game. Interestingly enough, this almost never hurt my feelings. I was quite proud that they included me as a capable participant, and each new round of play renewed my drive to find everyone faster and better than the last time. As I grew older, I began to adapt to the demands of the game, just as Darren, Aly, Carlos, Nick, and Blake expected I would.

While searching for people in hiding places, I got very good at using my ears to listen for slight movement or breathing. I never told them, but I targeted whoever it was that happened to be wearing the brightest shirt that day because they were easiest to find hidden in piles of clothes or in dark spaces under beds. I preferred to play inside where I could better control the background noise, and I did not like to play outside where wind or cars made it harder to hear quiet sounds. Upstairs was better than downstairs because the floors creaked upstairs. And my house was better than a friend’s house because I knew the distinct sounds of my house. Combining the auditory cues with the little eyesight I had, I began to meet and exceed the expectations of my brothers and sister. Because they expected me to play the game skillfully, I did. I was living proof that the greatest enemy of adversity is adaptation. In fact, I dare say I was eventually the best hide-and-go-seek player in the house!

But it was not all just about child’s play. My mother

knew hide-and-seek was only the beginning. If I was going to be successful in life, I had to learn to believe in myself. Her expectations were reasonable, but high. She believed I could and would be able to do the things she asked of me. She supported me when she could and allowed me to fall when I needed to. Her expectations never wavered, and neither did her faith in my ability to adapt. “Adapt to the world,” she would say, “because the world will not adapt to you.” I did not understand then, but I know now, that it was the greatest gift I have ever received. She gave me self-confidence, self-worth, and self-discipline, which in turn gave me my independence.

When it came time to do chores around the house, Mom doled out assignments to all six children. When she did this, she always treated me as a fully capable child, even in times when I didn’t *want* to be fully capable. When it was my turn to sweep the kitchen floor, she would hand the broom and dustpan to me, never allowing an “I can’t see the floor” to enter the conversation.

And so I would sweep. I grumbled as much as the next child, making it plainly clear to everyone in the room that it was cruel of Mom to make her blind daughter sweep *invisible dirt*. But deep down, I was proud of what I did. I was being responsible for taking care of our home, just like everyone else. Sweeping the floor was a refuge of normalcy for me. It was a place where I was appreciated for the person I was becoming rather than the disability I carried.

When I finished sweeping the floor, I would go about my day until it was time to go to bed. Lying there, just before sleep, I knew that if I listened closely enough, I

could hear my mother downstairs in the kitchen. *Swish, swish, swish*. It was the broom, going over all the places I had missed. I am sure it drove Mom crazy to have to re-do the task she had given me. It would have been much faster for her to have just done it herself the first time. But she continued asking me to sweep the floor, and she continued to expect that I would do a good job.

It wasn't the clean floor she wanted. It was a daughter who found a way to rise to the challenge of high expectations. Her high expectations taught me to be proud of who I am, no matter how poor my housekeeping skills were proven to be.

That childhood gift has grown into an adult understanding that I must no longer rely on someone else to expect great things from me. I can now expect them from myself. And beyond that, I can expect the same from everyone I meet. I have high expectations of every single person that reads this book—if I didn't, there would be no point in writing it!

I now hold you, the reader of this book, accountable for your decisions regarding expectations of yourself. You cannot escape this decision because accountability is like deodorant. It's great if everyone else has it, but if you forget it for yourself, it does not take long to stink up the place. You'll be the obvious culprit! Remember that as you make a personal choice right now to expect great things of yourself. It does not matter where you came from or who pushed you down. It does not matter what mistakes you have made or what circumstances you have endured. Today is your day, and the choice of excellence is now yours. Nobody can take

that from you!

You were not put on this planet to be mediocre. You were put here as part of God's perfect plans, which specifically state that you can have high expectations for your future. The Bible (Jeremiah 29:11) says "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." That's *JOYFUL LIVING AND BOUNDLESS SUCCESS!* With the plans already laid out for you, your first step towards enjoying them is to expect that you can. It does not matter if it is invisible dirt you sweep. *Expect* that you can, and you will.

CHAPTER FOUR

Create a Virtual 25th Hour of the Day: Get Organized

*“You will never find time for anything.
You must make it.”
—Charles Buxton*

I can only write about this topic with good conscience if I tell the truth. I am not by nature an organized, list-making person who sets priorities in my day-planner. I can only claim to have started learning this skill. And even that has been by force of motherhood and blindness. I have kicked and screamed the whole way as I filled my calendar, alphabetized my spice rack, and made my grocery list according to the actual aisles in the store. But as I said, I do these things not because I enjoy putting sage next to salt, but by pure, unabashed necessity.

As you know, it is very inconvenient to be a disorganized person. This is especially true when you are visually impaired. Don't believe me? Here is an example of a blind person's disorganized day. Please note that to my credit, only part of the story below is actually true...

* * *

I'm eating my frozen waffle breakfast at 8:00 a.m. while standing at the sink unloading the dishwasher, which holds dishes from two nights ago when we had company for dinner. The phone rings and I quickly dry my hands to answer the phone, grumbling for the 147th time that I NEED to go buy a headset phone so I can keep washing while I talk. It's the pediatrician's office on the phone—don't forget your son has a well-baby visit scheduled for 10:30 this morning. No problem, I tell her, as I race to find my cell phone. I need the cell phone so I can retrieve the conveniently stored phone numbers of people who drive me where I'm going. Why didn't I write phone numbers for my drivers where I could find them? Because that would be too easy, that's why.

I forgot about the pediatrician appointment (it's in my day planner, which I have not looked at since Tuesday) so I have to rush to make transportation arrangements to get there. Today I WISH I could get in the car like most other people and just drive myself.

Oh, so back to looking for the cell phone. I know I set it down somewhere, probably right in front of my nose, but surprise-of-the-day I'm legally blind! Of course, I don't see it. I need to be able to hear it ring so I can find it. So I pick up my non-headset home phone and call my cell phone.

Ring! But it's quiet ringing. Where is that cell phone? I track it to the west side of the kitchen but now the ringing stops and voice mail picks up. I leave a message for myself to put my phone in my purse next time so I can find it when I need it. I call the cell phone again. Ringing

is still quiet. Voice mail again. Call. Ring. Voice mail. WHERE IS THE PHONE?! I HAVE TO CALL ONE OF MY DRIVERS TO GET TO THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE BY 10:30 AND BY THE WAY WHY HAVE I NOT BOTHERED TO MEMORIZE THE DRIVERS' PHONE NUMBERS ANYWAY?!"

Call. Ring. Found it. In the refrigerator.

Now I remember. I was on the cell phone last night with my sister-in-law while I was cooking. I had to call her because I lost the recipe card I needed for dinner and she could tell me over the phone how to fix it. So, about the cell phone—I must have put it away with the butter.

Anyway, back to looking for today's driver. I call two people and get to a real person on the third try. Is she available for a no-notice trip to the doctor? Yes? Oh, fabulous! But she has to be back by noon to pick up a child from kindergarten. Hopefully the doctor is not running late... but he usually is. I'll deal with that if it comes up. Gotta go get ready...

Wait, I didn't finish breakfast. Where's that waffle now? Well, forget it. Too little time. Get ready and go to the doctor.

The rush of the day is rolled into one fluid motion. Baby is well, doctor is late, driver gets a friend to pick up her child, and I find my waffle at 4:45 in the afternoon right where I left it in the morning—on a clean stack of dishes I had put away in the cabinet. So much for unloading the dishwasher.

* * *

And for all that fun and excitement, I have wasted at least an hour of my time scrambling to fix problems I created for myself by not being organized! Have you had days like that?

I have a theory that being efficient and organized on a daily basis is easy for a few fortunate people because God programmed them that way. What a gift! For those of us who do not have that blessing, organization becomes a conscious, everyday choice that we must make. It is something that takes work (a LOT of work in my case!), but the payoff is astounding.

If you feel there are not enough hours in the day, take a step back and review your day as I did above. Take a look at all the places you could have saved time. Then start by picking one thing to do that will help prevent common problems in your life.

Always lose your keys? Get a key hook, hang it by your door, and make it your one goal for a week (or longer if needed) to get into the habit of actually USING the key hook. It might sound ridiculously simple or even absurd to focus on something so small, but this is how organization must start. Small. As key-losing people around the world make a small change to save ten minutes here and there because they are not looking for keys each time they leave the house, the payoff starts to become expected and the built-in drive to get organized will grow.

New organizational skills emerge, clothes will be laid out the before bed, lunches will be made assembly-line style, library books will get returned on time, and soon... an hour or more of stress, worry, frustration, aggravation,

and wasted time can be saved! That's like adding an extra hour to your day and guaranteeing that it will be a GOOD hour!

Quick... where are your keys right now?

CHAPTER FIVE

Use What You Have... and Be Glad About It!

*“May we never let the things we can't have,
or don't have, or shouldn't have,
spoil our enjoyment
of the things we do have and can have.
As we value our happiness let us not forget it, for
one of the greatest lessons in life is learning to be
happy without the things
we cannot or should not have.”*
—Richard L. Evans

Sometimes we can get so close to a situation that we are not able to back up and see the big picture. That’s how it was when my family was poor. We were well into poverty before I realized how dire our situation was. But when I finally did figure out what we lacked in the areas of basic necessity, it was as big as a Texas cockroach.

One day when I was about eleven years old, I called my mom at work. It was honestly a complaint call for the record books. I had to go to the bathroom and there was no toilet paper in the house. I knew she would be going to the grocery store that night with our food stamps. I also knew she couldn’t really do anything about it while

she was at work. And I knew that although Mom would have been sorry about the situation, it would be up to me to figure it out until she got home. But in superb eleven-year-old fashion, I wanted to whine about it anyway.

“Are you sure there is no toilet paper ANYWHERE in the house?” she asked.

“No. Not anywhere.”

I hadn't *really* done an exhaustive search, but considering the fact that I was little more than an antsy kid jumping up and down with crossed legs, the search had been as good as it was going to get. Besides, my favorite TV show, *Silver Spoons* (starring my dream boyfriend Ricky Schroeder) was coming on in a few minutes. TV was a luxury in my world. I was in a big hurry.

Finally conceding that there really was no toilet paper in the house, my mom talked me through alternative options on the phone without much luck. There were not any paper towels or napkins to substitute. Use a towel? None are clean. Wash some clothes? No laundry detergent. Drip dry? No thanks.

When I could wait no longer, I decided to just go to the bathroom anyway and then take a shower to rinse off. As I reached to turn on the water for that shower, it occurred to me that if our bills had not been paid, there would be no hot water. In that instant, the cold bathroom got a lot colder.

I did not have a personal relationship with God then, but I thought He might listen to my prayer anyhow. So I silently prayed for just a little hot water so I could rinse off with calm dignity. It was an absolute moment of desperation. It was a moment that I thought happened

to other people, but not me. For the first time, I realized that we were the family I thought we would never become. We were *poor*.

And I was so cold. *Please let there be hot water. Please let there be hot water. At least let it be warm for a minute.*

I turned the spigot... *Praise and glory to God!* The water was hot! As the warm water rushed from the spout, I was beyond happy to have hot water. We didn't have toilet paper, we didn't have paper towels or napkins or laundry detergent, but we had HOT WATER! What sixth grader on the planet is happy to have something as simple as hot water? ME! I stood there for a long time understanding what we did not have but being entirely grateful for what we did. It never felt so good to use what little we had to deal with the essentials of life.

As I grew older, I learned to use what I have in a lot of other ways. For example, one of the most inconvenient aspects of having a visual impairment is the inability to drive. This is especially the case if you are an independent, go-all-the-time kind of person like me. Living in Texas has made it an ongoing ordeal to find transportation for myself and my children. It's not like living in New York or Washington, D.C. where there are somewhat affordable taxis, convenient busses, trains, or subways. This is a place where I hire a driver for an hourly salary to do everyday things a mom does. Errands like going to buy a birthday gift or taking the kids to a play group is not just a matter of getting in the car and going.

And, as if meticulous planning were not process enough, I have learned the hard way that arranging a great transportation schedule is still not foolproof.

Drivers get sick at the last minute or their lives dictate schedule changes that are not convenient for me. Cars break down. Miscommunication happens. I have spent countless hours waiting on rides to and from places. I've missed a meeting with the President of the University because three taxis in a row did not show up even when I called three hours in advance to allow for travel time in bad rain. I've even gone to exercise at the local health club, and while waiting for my ride home, I've watched people come into the gym, workout, and leave before my transportation showed up. (Rule: Don't tell me you don't have time to workout!)

It can be infuriating to depend on others for such daily tasks. It is very easy for me to get angry and focus on what I do not have (the ability to drive) rather than use my God-given resources to find a solution. In fact, when there is a transportation breakdown, sometimes I do get angry. But overall, I could not be happy or successful or even survive if I did not recognize what does not belong to me and use what does.

What do I have? I have an outgoing personality, a willingness to get organized, and a willingness to help others. Organization is a big key. I have to keep a tight calendar to work my schedule with a driver's schedule. I have to keep good lists and diaper bags packed and carseats in the right car in order to get where I'm trying to go. (All mothers know exactly what I am talking about here!) But, with that said, sometimes my usual driver is unavailable. That's when my willingness to help others and my outgoing personality helps tide me over.

As I go through life, I make a concerted effort to

meet new people, make friends, and maintain personal relationships because that is something I value greatly. I love having a circle of people to lean on in times of need and to share joys with in times of happiness. A side benefit of establishing loyal friendships is that as I give to the relationships in various ways, they almost always give back.

Often, friends will offer to help me with transportation simply because they are compassionate friends. Many times it is an open invitation to pick up slack whenever I get “stuck.” They do not expect anything in return. Of course I try to give back in other ways, like helping them with babysitting or sending a thank you note or baking cookies or buying lunch. For a large driving job I even insist on paying them on the same terms I pay a regular driver so as not to take advantage of the friendship. But often it is simply a friend being kind enough to do me a favor. It is a luxury I have enjoyed simply because I have been willing to use what I have—a cheerful, outgoing personality and a love for loyal, give-and-take relationships.

The message of this chapter is to start using what you have to gain what you want. It’s how we go about making the hard things in life become doable. It is the true essence of the 20/20 vision this book is about—looking forward rather than backward. We know there are going to be things along the way that have to be dealt with. We might not have all the tools we think we need to manage these things, but we always have *something*. Find that *something*. Make it work.

And the next time you take a hot shower, don’t worry

if the towel you dry off with is dirty because there is no laundry detergent. Dry off with the warm hair dryer like I did!

CHAPTER SIX

It's All in How You Look at It

“If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the million who will not survive the week.

If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank or in your wallet, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful, you are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.”

—Author Unknown

It's easy to look at our hardships in life and believe that we are in the worst situation possible. It can feel like we are slowly being eaten away by the fact that nobody in the world has ever dealt with a deck of cards like the ones we are holding. The burden we carry is so unbelievably huge that it will surely crush us at any moment. Or at least it feels that way when we are in the middle of it all.

In reality, we always have a choice in how we deal

with things that come into our lives. These choices are what make up the window of *perspective*. Foggy or clear, positive or negative, this window of perspective is how we filter life and choose to view our world, our circumstances, and our journey. In the long run, this window can have a huge impact on our overall quality of life. It can dictate the ability (or inability) to experience the joyful living and boundless success this book is all about.

On Mother's Day 1999, my husband Neil and I happily announced to our families that we were expecting our first child. Not at all concerned about what could go wrong as a human being is miraculously created within the womb, we looked forward experiencing the full realm of pregnancy. With a normal gestation period of 40 weeks, it was certainly enough time for us to prepare to meet our first child. For a fleeting moment, I thought I would actually LIKE being pregnant.

Now, some women have the pregnancy glow the entire nine months. They have great hair and nails and they become best friends with their ob/gyn. They just love being pregnant! I am very happy for these women. Really, I am! But I have to concede that I am not one of them. After my initial excitement about becoming a mother, I was pukey and hormonal and something always hurt. My perspective was warped because I allowed it to be warped, and I did not care what anyone else thought of me for that. Honestly, whoever said a pregnant woman is beautiful has obviously not seen me pregnant.

Throughout the first 16 weeks, I had a habit that was quite unpleasant. The rule was, if it went into my mouth, sooner or later it would automatically come back

out in reverse. Absolutely nothing stayed down. Not even a sip of water. I routinely raced for the restroom dragging around my IV pole, carefully dodging strategically placed buckets. Oh, the glamour!

It was not long before I needed someone to take the wrath of my furious discontent. If I had that rule about not keeping food or drink down, my husband-who-got-me-into-this-position was going to have rules, too. That much was obvious to me.

The first rule I made for him was probably the hardest. He was not allowed to make coffee in the house because it made me sick. Knowing he was wise to keep any complaints to himself, Neil graciously moved the coffee maker into the garage, where he visited it every morning. As I started having more trouble keeping things down, Neil got what I deemed to be a new and improved rule. He was not allowed to make toast or cook anything else, for that matter, within my smell range—which at that time was about 30 miles. He was not even allowed to bring in the trash from fast food restaurants because it smelled repulsive. The TV and the radio almost got the boot, too, because there were commercials with gravy pouring over hot mashed potatoes and the radio had fast food ads talking about juicy hamburgers as they made that “sizzling” sound!

Somehow, the TV and radio got to stay put. But into the garage went the toaster, the George Foreman grill, and a few other things, and out of the house went my husband for—bless his heart—almost every meal. I have never in my life been more grateful that the wedding vows Neil and I shared included, “...for better or for

worse, in sickness and in health.” He surely would have run away otherwise! And as crazy as I was acting, I hardly could have blamed him if he did!

In those difficult days I was able to see that this pregnancy was going to result in a miraculous new life, but the burden was still very heavy to carry. I knew of no one who had to endure such severe “morning” sickness. Surely, I was the one woman on the planet who had it the worst. Or so said my hormones at the time. This was not the way pregnancy was supposed to be, I thought. None of my expectations had been met.

It was within those expectations that I discovered the vital importance of *perspective*. I was not able to enjoy the goodness of impending motherhood partly because of the physical difficulties, but even more than that, because I allowed my perspective to be skewed. That was my choice. Looking back, I can see that I could have opted for a much more positive perspective than the one I had. I could have chosen to join a support group, frame a sonogram picture above the toilet, or paid myself an “allowance” every time I got sick so I could buy something for myself when I was better. I could have chosen to put things in a positive light. After all, optimism is my usual path. But this time, I clearly missed the boat.

The nausea did eventually subside, though. My spirits rose and I was glad to see the morning-noon-night sickness deteriorate as my belly began to grow. I was actually starting to get excited about this baby. I was ready to start being a Mommy! Anticipation evolved into joy that filled my heart.

In my excitement, I devoured every pregnancy book

I could get my hands on. One day, I came across a section in a book that talked about cancer during pregnancy. I had been perfectly able to read about hemorrhoids and epidurals and morning sickness, but I was absolutely not going to read about cancer during pregnancy. I knew I had a bad attitude the first half of the pregnancy and I wanted to do what I could to improve that. I wanted to stay positive. Reading about cancer during pregnancy was too depressing and it didn't apply to me. I was a life-long athlete who never smoked or drank alcohol. I was only 26 years old and I ate a balanced diet. I had never worked near hazardous materials and, considering my history with the premature birth and the visual impairment and the eye surgeries in childhood, I felt I had paid my dues to the medical field, thank-you-very-much. As far as I was concerned, I did not fit the cancer "mold." So without a second thought, I skipped reading that section of the book.

I had no idea.

Just into my 24th week, I began to feel pain in my back and upper abdomen. Convinced that it was just normal pain in pregnancy, I ignored it. But soon, it became clear that this did not feel "right." The pain—whatever it was—quickly became excruciating. But my doctors were limited on options for diagnostic testing because of the pregnancy. As we juggled pain management decisions that tore at my heart, we found no answers. The agonizing pain mounted, and by 28 weeks I was in pre-term labor. I was trying so hard to have that positive outlook, but I was in great pain and I was fearful for my baby. Emotionally and physically, I was at my breaking

point.

Working with our team of doctors, and frustrated with the lack of answers, we were forced to deal with a very difficult situation. I felt like a ticking time bomb on bedrest. It was near impossible to keep my nerves calm. Our goal at that time was to manage my pain as much as possible and keep the baby in the womb as long as she was willing to stay there. Hopefully, that would be until she was full term—at least ten very long weeks away.

All glory to God, that is indeed what happened. Our daughter was born healthy at 38 weeks. Amazingly, my perspective was instantly clear. It had indeed been worth the difficult pregnancy. Nothing would have kept me from that precious baby girl. Amidst the joy of becoming a parent, I had all but forgotten the mysterious back and abdominal pain.

But my obstetrician had not. As I recovered from delivery, he was persistent enough to order some follow-up tests. Not really concerned, but anxious to get some answers, I went for the tests the doctor had suggested. After searching for months during my pregnancy, we finally got a diagnosis.

It is a memory burned into my mind with searing heat. My husband started a new job that day, so I was home alone with my five-week-old daughter when I got the call from my obstetrician. He compassionately explained that the news was not good. I had a kidney stone in the right kidney and a lemon sized tumor in the left kidney. It was the day my world changed forever.

Too stunned to speak with much clarity, I had a brief conversation with my doctor about what was to come in

the next few weeks. I heard his voice but I could not process his words. Nephrectomy. Biopsy. Lithotripsy. Soaking in vocabulary I had never heard before and trying to internalize the sheer magnitude of the situation was unbearable. Not really wanting to know, I asked a question I had never anticipated asking. Did it look like this was cancer? The doctor said he hoped it was not, but it was impossible to be certain without removing it. Three weeks later, still healing from delivery, my left kidney was removed and a stent was positioned to prevent problems with the stone on the right side. While I was in surgery, the pathology report came back positive: Renal Cell Carcinoma. Kidney cancer.

What about my baby? How would she cope if the cancer wins? My husband? My family—my parents and siblings? My friends? Would my baby even remember me? Oh, God, please take this burden from me...

The burden was not taken from me, but I was given the grace to navigate some very dark days. Let's not forget the pregnancy, from which I had been well primed. In the early days of pregnancy, I had not handled disappointment very well. This time, I chose a different perspective. It was not easy. I cried a lot in the beginning and I was terrified of the cancer returning. But I fought for that positive perspective. Life had immeasurably changed with the birth of our daughter—I had much to fight for.

I was scared, but I was also grateful. I knew immediately that if the events of the pregnancy had not happened in just the way they did, nobody would have

been doing CT scans of my kidneys. Nobody would have found that tumor until it was too late. Plain and simple, I would be dead or terminally ill by now if the timing of events had been anything other than what they were. The find was by God's grace alone.

Yes, it has been a long journey. It was not easy physically or emotionally. There were lots of days when people told me that I was brave and I knew that I was not. A lot of days, I was scared out of my mind.

But time has passed, and through many tears my faith has grown. My window of perspective has been washed. There have been no more kidney stones, and today I am four years into kidney cancer remission. While it "officially" takes five years of remission to be considered "cured," I am able to think positively now. I consider myself a cancer survivor already. As I see it now, a little nausea over a TV commercial is not really that bad.

Does your perspective window need washing? What are you doing with the trials you face right now? Are they wearing you down and breaking your spirit? Or are they just hard enough to make you think through your priorities and get stronger? Are you able to look at the struggles you now face and see where they can move you? It is a daily—sometimes hourly—choice. Make that conscious effort to choose the clear window.

Sometimes when I feel my perspective getting foggy, I remind myself of the cancer experience. The scar from the surgery looks like a large rainbow sitting just below my ribcage. It starts on the right side, goes across my abdomen, and down the left side. People have listened to my story and commented that it looks like a huge sad

face. But I don't see it that way. After spending time on this journey of life and death, the scar is a reminder of all we have been through and all we have gained from that trial. To others looking at me, it might be a sad face. But from my perspective looking down at my stomach, the scar is a very large happy face.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ask For Help Even When You Don't Want It

"I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day. I had so much to accomplish that I didn't have time to pray. Problems tumbled about me; and heavier became each task, "Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered and He answered, "You didn't ask.""

—Francis Gray

My first day of college at The University of Texas. I was one of 50,000 students, but that didn't bother me a bit. I was ready. I knew the fight song and the Alma Mater. I knew how to get to the library, the bookstore, the gym, and the Student Union. I had performed reasonably well in high school, scored an 1150 on my SAT, and I had a cool haircut. I even liked one of my two roommates. As far as I was concerned, the University of Texas was all mine.

And then, I went to my first class.

On my way there, I felt fear building in the pit of my stomach. I was not worried about the usual things a college freshman might worry about—getting into the right sorority or fraternity, meeting the right people, and

going to the right parties. I was worried about making a fool out of myself. Or even worse—not making it at all.

Despite my severe visual impairment, I often don't appear to have a disability to the average observer. I use my ability to see color to navigate, so I walk around without assistance all the time. I don't use a white cane or guide dog, and I don't bump into things. As I transitioned from high school to college, I suddenly realized that the small world of high school where everyone knew I had a disability was now opened to a world where I actually had to TELL people I needed help. I had been legally blind my entire life, but telling someone about my needs and asking for assistance was not only new to me, it was humiliating and terrifying.

It was a strange place for me to be. Outwardly, I was a confident person. I was a cheerleader, for crying out loud! Of course I looked confident. But inwardly, I was not feeling very secure at all. It took all the courage I had to allow the public to get even a glimpse of my world.

I have a monocular, which is a small telescope to help me see things at a distance, but I hated using it for something as simple as checking to see if I was getting on the right bus. People stared. My heart raced as I fought nervousness at the simple task of going into the bookstore to buy my books. I knew it meant I would have to ask a busy sales person to help me find what I needed. Couldn't I see that these people were busy? It was in that self-destructive frame of mind that I arrived at the first class of my collegiate career.

I had rehearsed what I was going to say to the professor a thousand times. It was going to be a simple request,

especially since professors are required to make modifications for disabled students. My spiel went something like: *Hello, sir, my name is Andrea. I am student number 468 in your physics class. I just wanted you to know that I am visually impaired, so I may need some extra time to read my tests. And also, if it is okay with you, I would like to write directly on any tests that we have because I can't see the bubbles on computerized answer sheets.*

It didn't come out quite so smoothly, but considering it was the first time I had ever spoken to a college professor, I was just proud of the fact that I was able to get all of that information out of my mouth without losing my breakfast. And then came the professor's answer to my request for help.

"If you can't see the bubbles on answer sheets, how can you see the test? I am not so sure you belong here."

I was crushed. I didn't stand up for myself, and worse than that, I allowed his response to dictate the way I handled future encounters with professors who were probably more than willing to help. At the very least, other professors were most certainly more enlightened than he had been. Because of the physics professors' harsh words, I didn't want to ask another professor for help again. In fact, it was a long time before I did, and my grades can prove it.

I struggled through three or four near impossible semesters passing up many opportunities to be successful. My grades were barely a C average, and my emotional well-being was failing for sure. I worked and worked, but I wasn't on an even playing field with everyone else. The worst part about it was that it was my own fault.

Finally, after two years of being angry, I got tired of it. I swallowed my pride and my fear and my poor-me attitude, and I sought out the most patient professor I had. I went to her office, explained my situation, and asked her to help me be successful.

And you know what? She did. And so did the next professor I asked to help me. And the next and the next. Before long, I had established a long list of professors I considered to be colleagues and friends. I was suddenly surrounded by the people who believed in me. These professors did much more than teach me how to be successful in the game of collegiate academia. These were people who saw a floundering student reaching out and seized the opportunity to make it work. These were people who taught me how to accept my disability for what it is, and make ways to get around it. They taught me how to be proud enough to defend myself with integrity when I encountered people like the physics professor. But they also taught me that people like him were few and far between. For the most part, people are willing to help.

As I learned from this fine group of professors, my grades went up. I did well enough in my last two years of college to gain admittance to graduate school. I won't say it was an easy trip, but because I was able to ask for help, I was successful. I later finished my master's degree in education, with a reading specialist certificate attached, in one year. I did that with a 4.0 GPA, as the Graduate Student of the Year. It was a far cry from my meager beginnings. I had finally learned to cope, and I was not ashamed to ask for help.

If you find yourself struggling in life, ask for help. If you do not get the right answer from the first person, keep asking. You'll eventually find the help you need, you'll probably make a few lifelong friends, you'll feel better about what you have been able to accomplish, you'll have fun getting there, and you'll never go back to doing it all by yourself again! Celebration of accomplishment is, after all, much more fun when you have others to celebrate with you.

CHAPTER EIGHT

If You Want to Get to the Top, Get Off Your Bottom

*“Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run
over if you just sit there.”*
—Will Rogers

Anybody can have a dream. Dogs, cats, and zebras can have dreams. (Well, at least I *think* they have dreams. I'm not really an expert.) But if you want your dreams of happiness and success to become a reality, you can't just stay asleep and dream all day. You have to wake up, get out of bed, and act on it.

Achievement requires a thoughtful and dedicated plan, a willingness to implement that plan, tenacity to overcome any obstacles, and perseverance to follow through until the goal is achieved. Even for the very self-confident person with a good track record, having the courage to dream big and follow those dreams can be pretty intimidating! But keep your chin up. Even with seemingly impossible dreams, you will find that achieving them is within reach when things get broken down into smaller bites.

As a former cheerleader for the University of Texas,

my twin sister, Aly, has always had a true understanding of school spirit—especially when it came to dressing her first child in Texas Longhorn Pride! But as Aly began collecting burnt-orange and white rompers for her little girl, she quickly realized that there was a need for collegiate baby apparel that was high quality, good looking, AND ultra comfortable. She combined the identified need with her desire to have her own company, and a dream was born. At that moment, the dream could have done one of two things. It could have been tucked into oblivion because she did nothing, or it could begin to grow because she did something. Fortunately for her and for babies everywhere, she chose the latter.

Aly decided to call her company College Buddies (with sister company Heavenly Buddies, LLC). She opted to start by making super snuggly collegiate baby blankets, with plans to expand the product line to include all sorts of baby and toddler apparel and accessories later. On the surface, this seemed quite impossible. In fact, it seemed so impossible that Aly started writing the business plan without much hope that things would progress beyond the actual document.

She knew nothing about sewing or fabrics. She knew nothing about selling wholesale to retailers. She knew nothing about manufacturing or licensing collegiate products or fulfillment companies or small business loans or taxes and record keeping or partnerships or anything else that might be useful in starting a company. She had never even written a business plan! But she DID know that if she ever wanted to see her dream of having her own company, she would have to take action herself. Nobody

was going to do this for her.

True to the chapter title, Aly wanted to get to the top, so she got off her bottom! She started with small steps knowing that someday she would have to jump. Sitting at the computer, she went through the research process for writing business plans. As she wrote that plan, she learned all she could about the manufacturing processes, the financial aspects involved, the marketing procedures, and more. She began to build a foundation of knowledge as she poured over information on the internet and at the library. She talked to whoever would listen and even some who wouldn't!

Aly made cold calls on stores and learned how to present her products to buyers through trial and error. She enlisted the help of Mom, an excellent seamstress, to create prototypes based on Aly's pencil drawings. And, while Mom worked on prototypes, Aly took the time to learn how to use her computer for product design. In the end, Mom turned out to be such an asset to Aly's learning curve that she became a partner in the company. From there, the ball started rolling faster and the College Buddies apparel line began to grow.

In all fairness, the creation and expansion of College Buddies did not come as easily as it may appear in this book. As the company was being formed, Aly was a very busy mother of one (and eventually two) young children. And while Aly was bringing two kids into her home, Mom was working on establishing new roots in life as she was getting the last of six kids out! As any young mother can attest, caring for young children is massively time consuming. As any mother with grown children can attest, life

adjustments between kids at home and kids away are much more chaotic than it appears at the surface. With so much going on in the lives of both partners, setting priorities and doing the leg work became a top priority if College Buddies were to become a reality.

From the first twinkle of thought about College Buddies, the ability to put forth the effort was a daily choice. Even when the work load of motherhood and life in general was heavy, Mom and Aly had to make a constant decision to stay active and keep up with the physical work. Aly took her daughter to the library on research trips and swapped babysitting time with friends. Both partners worked whenever they could—when kids were sleeping, on weekends, late at night, or early in the morning. They worked on planes, in the car, and in waiting rooms at the pediatrician's office. One way or another, they had to find time that really did not even seem to exist before they made the concerted effort. But that time and action contributed to the College Buddies dream, and so it has come to be.

In the two year time frame spanning from concept to present, College Buddies has grown from the sewing room at Mom's house to large overseas manufacturing facilities and a fulfillment company managing orders. The product line and university representation have been greatly expanded and College Buddies has secured a permanent place in the hearts of many collegiate fans, young and old. College Buddies is now strongly planted in what was once an impossible dream. Best of all, Aly and Mom are truly happy and successful in their work.

What's stopping *you*? Dream big dreams! Decide

what you want and make a plan of action. Share your plan with others so you will be held accountable for your actions. Choose now to overcome the obstacles that will come your way. Build your resolve to consistently move towards your goal. And now—*this very day*—roll up your sleeves and get to it.

CHAPTER NINE

Why Can't We Eat Bon Bons and Watch TV All Day?

"It is difficult to make a man miserable while he feels he is worthy of himself and claims kindred to the great God who made him."

—Abraham Lincoln

Corporate America often tells us to go to work early, skip lunch, and stay late in order to get the job done. It encourages us to do "whatever it takes" to succeed and to win "at all costs." We make business calls from the car while driving 75 miles an hour eating a candy bar for lunch. We get paged (and answer it) while at our kids' parent-teacher conference. And we check e-mail while we are on "vacation" because, hey, it's a fast paced, dog-eat-dog world.

Those who work at home caring for children and managing households have equal pressures, too. We have to plan the best birthday parties for the kids; be volunteer of the month 13 times a year; organize practice schedules for soccer, piano, and choir; clip enough coupons to keep the family grocery bill below \$100 a month; do seven loads of laundry a day; and teach the kids to read by age

two. Puh-leeeeez.

It's amazing, isn't it? While we work so hard to provide great things for our loved ones, we often ignore the fact that it is impossible to take good care of others if we do not first take care of ourselves! This is not to say that a strong work ethic is bad. Indeed it is good! Work hard, by all means. Just don't work in a way that inhibits your ability to function outside of work.

Consider a morning at a typical family-down-the-street household. From the moment the alarm clocks go off, there are noses to be wiped, clothes to find, shoes to be matched, teeth to be brushed, hair to be fixed, homework to finish, lunches to pack, and mouths to be fed. Moms, Dads, and caretakers everywhere know that it's easy to deal with everyone else and suddenly have the sinking feeling of, "Hey! What about me?" The kids might walk out the door looking great in their trendy clothes and cute haircuts, but Mom still has her wet hair up in a towel, a green exfoliating mask on her face, and those little foam toe separators on her feet so she can finish painting her toenails. Nice look, huh?

I actually don't use the foam toe things. I can't see my toenails to paint them so I don't bother. I don't use the towel on my head either because I have short hair. But one thing I do fight the urge to do is skip breakfast. Bad idea. If I feed my kids breakfast and don't take time to grab something for myself, my kids know it means trouble. Low blood sugar and motherhood do not go very well together. I am Grump-O-Matic Mom by 9:30 a.m., and that's only if the kids are being good!

It is definitely more convenient, or at least it feels

more efficient, for me to do other things while the kids eat breakfast. Perhaps I could unload the dishwasher or start some laundry? Check some e-mail, return phone calls, or update the company website? Address Christmas cards, make a grocery list, or pay some bills? There is always a long list of things I “should” be doing for my career and my job as a mom and wife. But the price of not taking time to eat just because I am “busy” can build a dangerous resentment over time. Feeling angry that everyone’s needs are ahead of mine can make it harder for me to be the mom I need to be. It makes it harder to concentrate on work I’m doing in the office. It makes it harder to simply enjoy the daily interaction with my children and my spouse. Those are God-given gifts that I have a responsibility to care for! Who am I to not take care of myself so that I can enjoy what God gave me? It is up to me to say, “Okay, if everyone else is going to eat, SO AM I!”

What is it like for you? Are you feeling like life is pulling you in a thousand different directions? Do you work so hard that you actually *miss* your friends? Do you miss your spouse or family? Do you wonder when you last bought a gift—for yourself? If you find yourself answering “yes” to these questions, then you have some decisions to make. The next time someone asks you what you have done all day, it is about time you tell them the plain truth: that you took great joy in eating bon bons and watching TV.

If your busy work schedule has crept into your personal life too much, cut out some of the late hours once a week and join the bowling league you have been

“thinking about” for the last two years. You’ll get time for yourself and you’ll go home to your family feeling more relaxed and happy that you did something for *you*. Is the combination of work and school breaking you? If you can afford it, try to either work less or take a lighter load of classes. I recognize that adding a semester or working fewer hours costs money, but keep in mind that a great education and all the money in the world will do you absolutely no good if you sacrifice yourself trying to get it.

With all of this said, I’m hungry. Instead of breakfast, I think I will go have a chocolate sundae. With a brownie. And nuts and whipped cream. Just this once. Well, maybe twice...

CHAPTER TEN

There is Always Someone Higher on the Mountain

“There is a difference between happiness and wisdom: He that thinks himself the happiest man really is so; but he that thinks himself the wisest is generally the greatest fool.”

—Charles Caleb Colton

At the age of 17, I was given the opportunity to travel to Winter Park, Colorado and learn how to snow ski. This might seem to be a great prospect for most kids, but I must concede that the idea of a ski trip for the visually impaired could appear to some amateurish folks to be a most idiotic idea. Granted, I am not totally blind. But, I certainly cannot see enough to get the car out of the driveway, much less avoid a cliff on a mountain. Who would be crazy enough to try something like skiing with their eyes closed?

I would!

Forget the nuts who think blind people can't ski! I had an amazing opportunity and I was an invincible 17 years old! I happily packed my bags and headed for the slopes.

When I arrived at Winter Park, home to the National Sports Center for the Disabled (NSCD), I quickly realized that complaining about my disability to these people would put me into the “Major Whiner” category. The NSCD can teach people with all sorts of disabilities how to ski—or snowboard, or mountain climb, or roller blade. Pick an outdoor sport, and they do it. They accommodate everyone and every disability you can imagine. From amputees and quadriplegics to mentally challenged and hearing impaired—people at this place clearly check the disability at the door and learn to love the sport.

It was no different with me. I met with a ski guide and began learning the ropes of Snow Ski 101. I had initially been disappointed when my guide told me I had to wear a BRIGHT orange vest that said BLIND SKIER over my very cute coat (I was 17!). But the instructor told me that the orange vest was necessary to make sure others would watch out for me. "Who could miss me in that bright orange?" I wondered aloud. Not being one to forego an opportunity for fun, I agreed to swallow some pride and wear the blind skier vest.

After the fashion woes subsided, I really started to enjoy skiing. My guide stayed with me the entire time, sometimes skiing in front of me letting me follow his sounds. Other times he skied beside me hip-to-hip, hand-in-hand, guiding with hand signals. And other times, he skied behind me giving me verbal cues.

At the end of my first day on the slopes, I had big plans to move to Colorado and ski every day. Not wanting the experience of that day to end, I stood still for a moment at the bottom of the run, taking in the peace of

the mountains. I'd forgotten all about the bright orange thing and was genuinely enjoying the freedom of gliding across the snow and feeling the wind wash by my face. And then suddenly, the serenity of the moment was broken.

I heard a voice quickly ascending to urgency. "Right! Right! Right! Right!" BOOM! In an instant, I was flying through the air, fully aware that I had been hit by a fast-moving skier who was at least twice my size! I had not even landed from the tumble before I realized the bright orange BLIND SKIER ordeal had all been for naught! How rude of this skier to barrel into me like that from out of nowhere!

As I brushed off the snow and shook out the cobwebs, I turned to see who had hit me. To my utter astonishment, it was another *blind skier!* What are the odds of that?!

Neither of us was hurt, but we could hardly get up because we were laughing so hard. We both knew there would never again be such an unlikely collision. "What's your problem?" I joked. "Didn't you hear me standing there?"

I tell the blind skier story all the time. Mostly, I tell it because it is an uproarious story. But it also gives me a chance to share a tiny piece of the life-changing skills that are being taught by the amazing contingency of volunteers at the NSCD. Skills like independence, self-confidence, perseverance, pride, trust, and teamwork. When is the last time you took a vacation and came home with all those skills in your luggage? Almost makes you want to be a blind skier yourself, doesn't it?

The truth is, in a lot of ways, we are all indeed blind skiers.

When the instructor works behind the blind skier, he (or she) is a little higher on the mountain. He has the ability to see ‘the big picture’ of where the student is headed. He gives commands in various ways for the student to know where to go. Knowing perfectly well that the guide will not tell him to go left if there is a tree on the left, the blind skier still has to choose which way to go amidst the commands of the guide. The guide can say, “Right! Right! Right!” all he wants. If the skier chooses to go left, he can. If he does his own thing and does not listen to the guide who has the big picture, he’ll hit a tree or find a cliff. Eventually, the blind skier will crash and burn, just like we do when we ignore authority and wisdom from others in our own lives.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the fact that we “know what we’re doing” that no one else’s input or advice could possibly be good enough. Our boss might give input because he or she has been where we are, yet we choose to ignore it. Then we wonder why the report we worked so hard on did not function correctly. Our teachers offer support for the science project and we let it roll over our backs because we have already made our own plans for an exploding volcano demonstration. Then we wonder why we only got a C. And the boyfriend Mom didn’t care for? How could it be that he ended up dating our best friend? Sometimes, others do know better than we do.

The simple truth is this: Listening to authority does not show weakness, but strength. It is the ability to let

go of what we think *should be* and allow others who see a more complete picture to guide us. Anyone can open their eyes and go where they want. But it takes an insightful, visionary person to know how to close their eyes and just *listen*. Listen upwind.

The next time someone “higher on the mountain” tells you, “Right! Right! Right!” which way will you go? Their way or yours? If you choose your way, be careful. It is quite possible that you are more blind than I am.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Different” is “Normal!”

*“Certain defects are necessary for
the existence of individuality.”
—Johann Wolfgang Goethe*

Have you ever tried to put together a puzzle with identical pieces? I’m not talking about just a difficult puzzle with pieces that simply look the same. I’m talking about a puzzle with pieces that are *literally* the same! Of course you have never done a puzzle like this! It would never make a picture, no matter how hard you tried to put it together. The pieces of the puzzle must be distinctly different from one another so they can fit together and form a solution—the big picture. Even if one piece is not “quite right,” it will be very obvious when the puzzle is put together!

It is the same situation with people. We’re all created to have differences and unique traits that make us absolutely individual. Even Aly and I, identical twins with identical genetic makeup, have differences! Imagine—if everyone were the same, the world would be so boring!

Yet with all our amazing uniqueness, we have an inherent desire to be like others. We need to assimilate to feel included and even needed. This need drives us to

wear certain clothes, have certain haircuts, and use certain language. But sometimes the need to be like others can become destructive, and our individual differences become a burden. If we fail to “fit in” with a certain group, it hurts. In some extreme cases this “failure” causes feelings of rage and humiliation. Even in seemingly benign circumstances, not fitting in with a desired group or trend can cause feelings of isolation and sadness.

That is how I felt sometimes when I was growing up. One warm summer night when I was about seven years old, I was out with the neighborhood kids catching fireflies. Actually, *they* were catching fireflies. I was putting on a good pout, feeling entirely excluded because I could not see well enough to join in the fun. I could see the flashes of light tempting me to chase the impossible, but the fireflies were so small and distant I had no real chance of actually catching one. Defeated, I sprawled out on my belly in the soft grass of our front yard and had a good cry.

My chin was resting on top of my folded arms, and the tears rolled freely down my cheeks as I listened to the squeals of delight and calls of “I got another one!” Lost in my self-pity, I barely saw the tiny yellow light in the grass. Not even an inch from my nose was the tiny flicker of a firefly! I carefully scooped it up as if it were the most valuable gem in the world. The tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy. For that one moment, I forgot that I could not see the way others could see. I had just done the impossible—I had caught a firefly!

I watched the firefly sitting on my hand as if it was a pet, and I wondered why it had not flown away. I was so close to it, but it never tried to go. And then, with

my face drawn so near, I could see. The firefly was missing a wing! Of course it could not have flown away!

Who knew you could have an instant bond with a firefly? But I did! I figured it was a wonderfully made match! I had one eye, the firefly had one wing... it was perfect! I was overjoyed that I had come across a firefly so unique that I could have caught it. The one-wing firefly would have been overlooked by every other kid in the neighborhood. But not me. This firefly, in my mind, was flawless.

When I caught the firefly that day, I discovered something very important. I learned that we are all different in our own ways, and that is how we are supposed to be! Why should “different” be a negative thing? Individual differences foster tolerance and compassion, they sometimes force adaptation, and they always keep the wheels of wonder going ‘round!

One person who has a great appreciation for individual differences is a man named Leo Buscaglia. Dr. Buscaglia is one of the most insightful teachers to ever grace the field of education. He has taught countless people how to do for themselves and how to be proud of their work. He’s taught high level academics to kids that have often been discarded as useless by the “rest of the world” simply because they did not have the “right” background or live in the “right” neighborhood. He taught them integrity and discipline and self-confidence, often when the students still struggled daily to meet their basic needs of food, safety, and shelter.

How did Dr. Buscaglia do it? He had an unfailing faith in the human spirit and a perfect appreciation for

individual differences. He was—and continues to be—the embodiment of family and love for his students. He said:

A wonderful realization will be the day you realize that you are unique in all the world. There is nothing that is an accident. You are a special combination for a purpose-and don't let them tell you otherwise, even if they tell you that purpose is an illusion. (Live an illusion if you have to). You are that combination so that you can do what is essential for you to do. Don't ever believe that you have nothing to contribute. The world is an incredible unfulfilled tapestry. And only you can fulfill that tiny space that is yours.²

After reading that assessment by Dr. Buscaglia, it is hard to look at being unique in a negative light, isn't it? I'm a little more proud of my crooked eyes and my quirky personality and my 5'1" stature. How do you like your freckles now? Feel a little short or tall or thin or pudgy? Good! Be proud of the way you were made! Indeed, it is a good thing that "different" is "normal!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

If a Caterpillar Does Not Change, He Never Learns to Fly

“Don't knock the weather; nine-tenths of the people couldn't start a conversation if it didn't change once in a while.”

—Kin Hubbard

The caterpillar has it right. No matter how scared or unsure he is of the future, nature dictates that in order to progress in life, he has to change. There is no such thing as procrastination for this caterpillar. No excuses or back-pedaling to keep the status quo. When the time comes for his change, he spins a neat little cocoon, takes a nap, and behold! When he wakes up, not only is he continuing life in a whole new way with a whole new form, but he has acquired the ability to fly! He can see things greater than ever before! Not only is change essential to life and to success, it is also fun!

A few years ago I came across a group of cheerleaders who desperately wanted to expand their school cheerleading duties into the competition arena. Having never competed before, they were excited at the prospect of winning championships and bringing home trophies.

They planned on working hard, competing to win, and making a strong name for their school.

Unfortunately, the school administration had other ideas. They were convinced that competition would detract from the cheerleaders' ability to do their primary job of supporting school sports. And the school had no history of cheerleaders competing in years past. Without much further thought, the administration denied permission for the cheerleaders to compete.

The girls were beyond furious. They did not understand the rationale behind the denial of their request. They vehemently argued that just because it had never been done before did not mean it could not be done now. Why wouldn't the administration just *change* its mind?

As it turned out, the administration never did change its mind. But, it did concede a little bit. The girls were allowed to use the school facilities and the school name to form an after-hours competition team. Of course when it came to facilities, the cheer team was lowest priority behind all other "sports." The administration specifically told the girls that it did not support or endorse their competition efforts in any way and would not claim responsibility for them. Every competition practice had to be completely separate from school practice and every penny of competition-related expenses were payable outside of school funds. The girls felt unappreciated by the very school they represented when they were treated this way. They did not understand why the leadership within the school was unwilling to change their cheer program for the better by simply supporting them.

But supported or not, the cheerleaders finally had

permission to compete. For that, they were thankful. Since it was an “extracurricular” team, the first item on the agenda was finding a coach. Originally, they had hoped to work with a well-known local choreographer. They had seen his work before and liked it. This coach would have done a perfectly fine job, but at the time they were requesting his services, he was unavailable. So as a “second... uh, only other... choice” I was asked to come work with the squad.

They did not know me from Adam, and they certainly did not want me there. When I walked into the gym for the first time, I was met with icy cold stares and pouty attitudes. Ignoring the daggers in the room, I gave the kids a short introduction and got to work.

It took less than a minute to see that this was not going to be the easiest team I’d ever coached. These kids showed up to practice an athletic sport with tight jeans, no shoes, jewelry dripping from their bodies, cell phones in their pockets, and gum in their mouths. Give me a break. When I gave command to move to a certain position, the kids would literally lie down on the floor or continue social conversation with their friends! The patterns of disrespect and lack of discipline that this team had established in the years before I arrived were painfully obvious. I was amazed that this was the same cheer squad that had literally begged to compete! Who were they kidding?

Crystal clear to me was the fact that this cheerleading team was going to change the way it functioned from top to bottom. They had not the slightest idea of how to carry themselves, much less carry an entire program. If

these cheerleaders were going to make a decent showing at competition time, it was obvious that the school administration was not the only group that needed to make some attitude changes.

As our series of practices began, the girls were able to see that practices with me were very different from anything they had experienced before at school. With competition around the corner, they were expected to actually show up on time, wear the right attire, work hard, respect authority, respect one another, and respect the sport. Amazingly, when they practiced with me, they actually *broke a sweat!* It was the disciplinary change they needed—even wanted. One would think that a team in their circumstances—who dealt with an *unchanging* administration—would move smoothly through this transition.

But change is hard for individuals and change is hard for groups. It wasn't just that the administration made life more difficult the cheerleaders. When the ball was in their court to change, this cheer team did their very best to keep things as they had been in the past.

Call it teenage rebellion if you want, but I'll tell you it was much more than that. The history these kids had established cheering together since seventh grade created a brick wall of undisciplined, disrespectful mentalities. Not every single person was like this, but most of them were this way at least sometimes. Some of them were that way all the time. They fought harder protecting the status quo than a mother bear protecting her cubs. They did not want anyone—even a coach who had a common goal of a championship team—to tell them what to do.

One afternoon on a particularly trying day, two girls came to me as practice was starting and told me they were going home. One was planning on leaving because it was her birthday, and the other was leaving because she “felt like it.” Historically speaking, these two kids would have gotten little to no punishment for this type of behavior, and they certainly were not about to let me change that for them. I, of course, did not see it that way.

I swiftly told the two girls that if they walked out of practice they would be dismissed from the team. I hated giving the ultimatum because if they did leave, I would have followed through and taken them off the team. In doing so, I would have lost two kids I cared about, and I would have created a lot of extra work for myself and the remaining cheerleaders to make appropriate adjustments to an already complete competition routine. It would have ruffled a few feathers (at least in the short-term) that I would be left to smooth over. It would have meant that I had to deal with possible screaming parents. Clearly, it would not be an easy thing for anyone involved if these kids left practice that day.

But I knew this was my test. If I were to ever have authority within this group, I had to give the boundary and stick with it. And the cheerleaders knew me well enough to know that I am a woman of my word. That is why I drew the line in the sand. For these kids, nobody had ever done that before.

After picking their jaws up off the floor, both girls stayed. Having seen my resolve for consistency, they knew I meant business. The unwillingness to change the discipline patterns on the cheer squad had officially been

cracked.

As time went on and the cheerleaders worked in a consistent environment with consistent expectations, they began to evolve into what looked more like a winning team. They definitely continued to test their boundaries, but they also began to work more comfortably within them. They began to understand that change was perhaps uncomfortable and unfamiliar, but it was a necessary thing in achieving their goals.

Like the caterpillar, their survival mandated that they get rid of the old and bring in the new. They wanted to learn how to fly! Much to my relief, they eventually changed. They began to work harder and develop the necessary skills for competition. They built pride in their work and in themselves. They meshed as a team and they developed as individuals. It was a true metamorphosis!

But the greatest change came at the conclusion of the competition season. Because the cheerleaders finally let go of what they once knew, a big change happened in the school cafeteria. Hanging proudly for all to see (including the doubtful administrators) was the rightfully earned National Cheerleading Championship banner.

Of course, the administrators have now said that all school cheerleaders will “officially” be allowed to compete. “Rah! Rah! Rah!” for change!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Don't Confuse Excellence with Perfection

"I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence I can reach for; perfection is God's business."

—Author Unknown

When I was finishing my degree in Education at the University of Texas, I was saddened that my student teaching schedule was too tight to allow me to continue cheerleading through my senior year. I had known for several years that it would come to this. And I knew that I had come to college for an education, not just to be a cheerleader. Disappointed, but understanding what needed to happen, I settled for watching my twin sister, Aly, cheer on the Longhorns that final year. Knowing I hated missing out on cheering my senior year, Aly was good about keeping me updated on how things were going at practice, especially as the team was preparing for the National College Cheerleading Championships.

Texas had spent a few years absent from the competition scene while the program shuffled coaches. But this year a man named Billy Pope was at the helm. Under his leadership, it was clear to everyone in Austin that the University of Texas cheer team was ready to compete again.

Interestingly, outside of Austin was a different story. Nobody in the competition arena expected Texas to even qualify, much less make a decent showing at Nationals. But the Longhorn cheerleaders sent in a qualifying video anyway. If it was good enough, they would be competing at College Nationals again.

And then came the day when Billy broke the good news. It was a rowdy crowd when he told the team that Texas had qualified for a paid trip to Orlando, Florida, home of the UCA National Collegiate Cheerleading Championships. After the celebration calmed a bit, Billy sat everyone down to set some goals. Knowing that the team was in its “rebuilding” phase, Billy wanted to know what place the team expected to earn at Nationals. Numbers started getting thrown around the room in short order. “Top 5.” “Top 8.” “Anything higher than Kentucky.”

Billy listened to the answers for a few minutes before telling the cheerleaders his opinions. What did he think? He thought the team was absolutely crazy. “Why,” he asked, “would you work this hard for this long to get anything less than first?” It made so much sense. And so the reverberating team motto was born. “Don’t practice for second place.”

And they didn’t. They were a dedicated squad with resilience in the face of adversity and dedication in the face of distractions. They built and perfected a rock solid routine when nobody expected anything from Texas. Day after day, they worked for everything they wanted. When the time came, they got on a plane to Orlando and walked into the competition with a great edge. They had not

practiced for second place. And they knew it.

The lights were intense and the noise was thunderous. Texas put on a near perfect performance. In the end, though, it was not quite perfect enough. It didn't matter, though. They had put it all on the line and they gave their best. At the end of the day, the University of Texas Cheerleaders could not have been more proud to take home their trophy—complete with a plaque that read “second place.” It was even okay that Kentucky had won.

It was? How was it okay that those endless hours of work (where the motto was, “Don't practice for second place.”) ended with second place? Why was the team celebrating like they had won the lottery ten times over? Because they knew the difference between *excellence* and *perfection*. The excellence applied to the effort. It applied to the ongoing journey for every individual and for the team as a whole. Sure, perfection would have been nice. It would have been very nice, in fact. A National Championship was the aim, but the excellence in effort is what the competition—and life—is really about. They did not practice for second place, but considering they were the Cinderella team that came out of nowhere, second place was very nice.

In our world of everything bigger and better, it's hard to keep excellence and perfection in the right places. But think about it. Excellence in our effort is something worth reaching for on a day-to-day basis, and even then, it's very difficult. We have off days where we are tired and don't feel like working hard. We have days when distractions are pulling us in fifteen directions so we end up not focused on the truly important items at hand.

With excellence in sight, we still have many days that demand difficult decisions and effective prioritizing.

In our aim to have excellence in marriage, we sometimes allow distractions of work burdens or activity-laden children to interfere. Or, in our aim for excellence at parenthood, we sometimes allow the stress of bills piling up or endless house chores to eat away our patience. Excellence in a career can be hindered by poor personal relationships or fear of failure or countless other items. Obviously, we have some serious balancing acts to do as we strive for excellence, and no one ever said it was easy!

Here is where we have to be careful. We tend to think a life of excellence also means *perfection*. Perfection is not possible very often, much less every day. In fact, the more we strive for perfection, the more likely we are to lose the ability to live in excellence. And the more likely we will not be perfect.

But if we strive each day for excellence in *effort*, every once in a while we will get to see perfection, too. It might be a long-lasting thing or it might only be for a fleeting moment, but it sure will be a memorable one! Indeed, don't practice for second place. You'll find that sometimes you go all the way to the top. But even if you get last place, and even if you are disappointed for the moment, when you consider the whole journey, it will still feel like you won. Make every day an excellent one.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Have a Hamburger Smile

“I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

—Albert Schweitzer

One morning not long ago, a friend called me and said that she was having a hard time dealing with some personal issues. I felt sadness for her strain and wanted to do something to help. It happened that I had a driver coming to help me run errands that day, so I planned to purchase a quick cheer-you-up gift at the grocery store and drop it off at my friend's house.

An hour later, I was finishing up my shopping with quite a stock pile. I had filled my cart with groceries and I had selected a card of encouragement and a box of fancy cookies for my friend. On the way out of the store, however, we passed through the floral department. I *love* the floral department. I know nothing about flowers and I do not have a green thumb. (I can barely grow a Chia Pet!) But I just love flowers. Even the plastic-wrapped Wal-Mart flowers. They are refreshing for the décor as well as for the soul!

As my driver and I engaged in happy flower conversation, I told her that I would like to buy fresh flowers for myself more often. Specifically, I wanted to buy flowers just to enjoy them, rather than once every two years because my husband's boss was coming for dinner. I wanted to buy flowers more often because I like how they make me feel. And if they made me feel good, they would make my friend feel good, too. What a great idea to buy my friend flowers! She needed some cheering up! But I had already selected the other items for her, and our grocery bill was particularly high that week. In the interest of not overspending, I decided to pass on the flowers. For that week, it was sufficient to simply talk about how I *planned* to buy grand bouquets someday and then just get a good sniff on the way out the door!

But unbeknownst to me, an employee in the Wal-Mart floral department had ears as good as mine. She must have overheard the conversation between my driver and me because as we waited to check out, she came over to our line and handed each of us a dozen beautiful roses. "These are for you," she said, as I stood there in utter amazement.

The store apparently had a policy of giving their near expired flowers away to customers rather than simply throwing them out. I could not have cared less that these flowers were "unusable!" This kind gesture, spurred on by an employee who cared enough to listen to her customers and exceed their needs, truly made my day bright. I expected a sniff of roses as I walked by the bouquets, and instead I was handed a dozen! Aside from making me very happy, she gave me reason to say good things about Wal-Mart to others. Wal-Mart! Wal-Mart! Wal-Mart! Yeah!

The contagious fever of joyful giving continued as we packed groceries into the car. Remembering our conversation from inside the floral department, my driver knew that I wanted to give flowers to my friend. But she did not want me to be without flowers myself. So she said, “Okay, you give your flowers to your friend and I’ll share mine with you!” I felt all warm and fuzzy on a cold day for the second time in ten minutes! I really need to shop at Wal-Mart more often.

But Wal-Mart isn’t the only place I go. When I was a young girl, my family went to K-Mart. One year when I was about five years old, all the kids piled in the car with our sweet little kid clothes and went to take family pictures at K-Mart. Don’t laugh. K-Mart took some great pictures! (What do I know? I can’t really see them that well...)

As we took turns getting individual portraits made for each sibling, I sensed that the already crowded store was getting even more crowded. I liked to think everyone was there to watch us getting our pictures made, but alas, it was more likely that Christmas shopping agendas were the culprit. But the people piled in as my older brother Darren had his picture taken, followed by Aly and me. My younger brother Carlos was next, and he was not happy that the now packed store was his studio audience for picture day.

As Carlos sat for his portrait, the photographer was having trouble getting him to smile. “Say *hamburger*,” the photographer crooned. Carlos stuck his bottom lip out enough to murmur, “hamburg....” The request was repeated several times, each time with the photographer

asking him to say *hamburger* a little louder. Each time, Carlos mumbled half-a-hamburger with a pouty look on his face. Not portrait material, to say it nicely.

Then suddenly, it clicked. Finally grasping what the photographer needed from him, Carlos gave more. From within his tiny four-year-old body came an unprecedented eruption of voice.

“HAAAAAAMMMMMBBBBBUUUUR-
RRGGGGGEEEEERRRRRRR!!!!”

It was better than any Blue Light Special announcement I have ever heard. Everyone stopped dead in their tracks to see the boy who had yelled, “Hamburger!” Giggles and smiles abounded, and Carlos had found his niche. Amused at the great attention he had just achieved, he gave the photographer a giant grin. *Snap!* The picture was perfect.

Time has passed since then and the picture is faded, but the spirit of giving beyond expectations still lies within Carlos. It is a choice he made long ago, and it has served him well since then in his career and in his personal life.

You are no different than Carlos. (Well, as his sister, it is my duty to say that I hope you are a *little* different than Carlos...) You, too, can give more than people expect. You’ll be amazed at what you get back.

When I was in college, I often stopped by a convenience store on the way to class to buy a bottle of water. While in line to pay one day, the girl in front of me realized that she needed to put an item back because she did not have enough money to buy everything she selected. Without thinking, I told her to leave her items on the counter and handed her fifty cents to cover the balance.

It was *just* fifty cents. But it might as well have been fifty dollars. This girl was very grateful that a stranger did that for her. For me, it was no big deal. I had change I wanted to get rid of anyway. But to her, it was more than she expected from anyone, especially from someone she did not know. Her appreciative smile and word of thanks, however, was far more than I expected from her. And it certainly was more valuable than the fifty cents I paid for it! It felt great!

Feeling great is what we're aiming for here! It is part of joyful living and boundless success. Let it become part of who you are to observe what others want and then give more than they expect. It's fun! Try it—you too will get a lot of giggles and smiles, and there will be many fabulous pictures of you with the perfect HAMBURGER grin.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Find Your Laughing Place

“The very first step toward success in any occupation is to become interested in it. Locke put this in a very happy way when he said, give a pupil ‘a relish of knowledge’ and you put life into his work.”

—Sir William Osler

Lance Armstrong found it in his cycling career. Michael Jordan found it in basketball. Elton John found it in music and Emeril found it in food. All over the world, landscapers find it in dirt and pilots find it in the sky. Teachers find it in the “Ah-ha!” of a child and pastry chefs find it in the “Mmm!” of their customers.

What are they finding? Passion! A true passion for what one does—it’s what a friend of mine has aptly called “your laughing place.” What a perfect description! Finding your laughing place is being able to experience the pure joy in something that is uniquely you. It’s being able to wake up every day with happiness in your heart because you are doing what you have been uniquely created to do! What a feeling of purpose!

As I work in the cheerleading industry, I love to watch the kids and adults who are operating within their

laughing place. These people routinely lose their minds with excitement over something they accomplished! Do you ever get so excited about things in your life? When is the last time you jumped up and down like a kangaroo just because you won fifth place? What is so great about standing on top of a pyramid? Why can flips and flops create unbridled euphoria in a group of parents and grandparents in the audience? It's that laughing place again! To watch, you would think that nothing could dampen the spirit of a cheerleader who loves what he or she is doing.

And that is often the case. Working with various companies at regional and national competitions, I have learned that there are several must-have items near the competition mat. Mainly, these items are trash cans, vacuums, and what we call "dry powder." That's because it is pretty much par for the course for some kids get sick just before, during, or after they compete. Some cheerleaders get so nervous that they establish their own predictable patterns of sickness and the coaches know to warn the competition staff ahead of time! One kid I know really took the floor for a spin. In the course of the two-and-a-half minute routine, she put on her own personal show *four times*... and never missed a beat. And the best one—the kid who stood at the top of a pyramid, held a sign parallel to the floor, got sick on the sign and then threw the sign off to the side without getting a drop of mess on anyone. That is one way to keep your teammates underneath you happy!

Anyone who has not experienced cheerleading might wonder why in the world a kid continues to cheer when they get physically sick every time they get set to perform.

It seems like such a miserable thing! And so revolting in front of hundreds of people! But within the industry, it is entirely understandable. The athlete who deals with this strong physical response to nerves does so because he or she has a true passion for cheerleading. The inconvenience of sickness is unpleasant, but it is not powerful enough to override what is really their “laughing place!” (That’s some *serious* laughing as far as I am concerned!) The experience of competitive cheerleading is so fulfilling and brings such joy to these kids that it is an obvious choice. They deal with the nasty stuff as best as possible and keep on cheering simply because it’s fun! They love what they do. These kids see much more in their chosen sports activity than the outside observer. Face it... if you are going to toss your cookies, you might as well do it while you toss people. It's far more impressive that way.

But your hobbies and interests don’t have to be extraordinary or super-hero style to be worthy of a laughing place. Being in your element—and knowing it—is the essence of happiness and success, even if it looks “everyday” to others. A friend of mine has found that joy in parenting. She really has a true heart for motherhood. Of course, most parents love their children beyond words. But to find her ultimate laughing place in motherhood is such a blessing!

This friend learned to roll with the punches when life as Mom got tough. She endured some very serious decision processes and navigated extraordinarily difficult family circumstances. She learned to use stressful situations with her children as building blocks rather than stumbling blocks. And, while the process of managing the

hard things was not easy, she was able to endure them and respond to them effectively because her true joy is in motherhood.

What did my friend accomplish by finding her laughing place? What was her success? It was certainly not a paycheck. In fact, she had to pay a lot for those kids! But she was successful in her own happiness and in what she passed on to her children. She took an active role in their lives without trying to become their best friend. She inspired her children to be kind to others, to be responsible for their own actions, and to be a positive contribution to the world. She provided consistent and fair discipline and taught her children about accountability. She taught them to love, live, and laugh through her actions. She taught them to have compassion for others and she taught them to stand up for themselves when they needed to. She taught them to take risks and to stick with things that were hard. Through her passion for motherhood, she taught her children that they are joyfully loved. She really did give them a priceless gift.

So now you can see it. Your laughing place is something that makes you so happy that success is almost automatic. It spreads from one area of life to another and it can even spread from one person to another. If your laughing place is playing the violin, you can walk down a congested sidewalk in the middle of the city rush with the sweet sound of the violin in your head serenading you to your destination. Many people will not understand that or even relate to it, but it doesn't matter. *You* understand it. *You* appreciate it. And because you understand that joy, you want to pass it along. So you go teach a

violin lesson to someone else who may, just like you, fall in love with the liquid perfection of the notes flowing from the instrument.

But what if you really don't know what makes you happy? How do you *find* your laughing place? The simple answer is that you look for it.

Break away from your comfort zone and try new things. Don't let anyone else tell you what you like—get out there and figure it out for yourself. It takes courage and perseverance, but you can do it. If you make a very personal decision to search for your laughing place, you will find it. Then jump in! It will change your life.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Be Careful What You Say... To Yourself

“Your own words are the bricks and mortar of the dreams you want to realize. Your words are the greatest power you have. The words you choose and then use establish the life you experience.”

—Sonia Croquette

“Go ahead. Make my day.”

“E. T. phone home...”

“If you build it, they will come.”

“Show me the money!”

“I’m King of the World!”

Chances are, you can name many if not all of the movies that contained those lines. You may even remember the details of why and how the lines were spoken, and you may recall the costumes the actors wore in those scenes. The screenwriters intended it that way. They make their living in the knowledge that words are extraordinarily powerful. Words can change the way we view the world and the way we view ourselves. They can shape our clothing trends, our hair styles, our attitudes, our demeanor, and our lifestyles. When used with a positive perspective and intent, words can be excellent catalysts for encouragement and happiness. On the other hand,

words used with negative intent can be hurtful or even devastatingly abusive. We must take great care of how we speak to others. And equally important, we must be careful of how we speak to ourselves. So the question becomes: How responsible are we with our words?

Are we using our inner voice (for ourselves) and our spoken words (for others) to bring joy and comfort and peace? Are we building confidence and courage? Does our language inspire creativity and innovation?

Or, is the voice we use for ourselves and others a negative one? Does it promote greed or jealousy or anger or gossip? Does it squash self-confidence or justify unacceptable behavior? Or does it even promote hate or rage?

Language can elicit a host of astonishingly powerful and far reaching responses. It is not just masterful communicators who have figured this out. It's everyone. Even children know that the power of words can be a double edged sword.

When my older brother Darren was in junior high, he and his friends did what a lot of pre-teens do. They hung out with girls, listened to loud music, played video games, and exerted a new desire for independence. And much to the chagrin of my parents, they literally spoke a *different* language. Not just teenager slang. An entire speech process made up by 13-year-olds. They called their version of verbal communication the *Bluh Language*. Pronounced exactly as it's spelled. Bluh!

The use of their language was maddening to everyone in the household. Darren would strut into a room and wait until everyone was looking. Then he'd puff out his chest as the smirk crawled across his face and he'd say

something like, “Beela on the treela on the sssiiiiiiiiid-ddddddeeeeee!” I did not know then, and I do not know now, what that means. But it meant something to him. And he was quite proud of himself for stumping everyone. It made him feel good to be in charge of the conversation, even though the conversation was one-sided!

The joy of being the Master of Bluh lasted for some time until Darren and Company tired of nobody understanding them. It was much more fun to use their language with someone who could actually *talk back*. So, they created the “Bluh Dictionary” and promptly sold a first (and only) edition copy to each of their parents. For the bargain price of a dollar, parent and child could understand one another once more. (Mom never would talk about beelas and treelas, though. Who could blame her?) With the Bluh Language history in our family, we have fairly well established that the power of words can send ripples through the pond. The trick now is to use that fact to our advantage as we build upon our own happiness and success.

I’ve noticed that I have spent a lot of time lately teaching my young daughter how to speak compassionately to others. We talk about kind words and how they make others feel. And we talk about negative words, and what the consequences of using those can be. But as I teach her how to use the power of words towards others responsibly, I am clear that it is equally important to teach her how to talk to herself.

Isn’t it amazing? Our world today often tells us that a high self-esteem is bad. It’s called conceited or pompous or aggressive. That’s a shame. Being able to tell ourselves

that we can achieve is vital to our happiness and success. Being able to honestly tell ourselves that we are loved or that we are worthy of friendships or that our body is good enough or that our mind is smart enough is absolutely essential. After all, God made man and woman in His image. Why would it be okay to tell ourselves that we are less than good enough?

Imagine you are offered a new job. The salary would be higher than your current one, and the location is great, but the responsibilities would be more than you have ever had to manage. You would have to learn new skills, and you would have to meet new people. For some, the choice to move to the new job would be a non-issue. But to many, it would be a supremely difficult decision.

On one hand is the temptation of an exciting new job with a raise in income. On the other hand is this scary animal of unknowns. That's when the inner voice I'm talking about kicks in. It either tells you that you *can* do it, or it tells you that you *can't*. If you hear the voice that says you *can't*, get out some soap. It's time to do a proverbial mouth washing!

Even for those who seem confident on the outside, self-talk can be crushing. This is especially true when new horizons are being offered and tested. We must make a conscious effort to talk to ourselves positively, even when others do not.

When I was in high school, I sometimes had trouble dealing with snide remarks kids made in ignorance about my eyes. Observing this, my step-dad (whom I call "Dad" since my biological father walked away) helped me learn to think positively about myself. He wanted to find a way

for me to see the positive facets of my existence.

We made a joke out of creating great lists of our talents. He was good at debate and he was good at making omelets and he was a good eater. In addition to Dad's list, I remember feeling quite pleased with my list, as well. The talent I liked best on my list was, "I am an excellent holder of cats." My Dad insisted that this was a true talent because he himself could not do it very well. He had a very successful corporate career and he could do lots of things very well, but he could not hold my cat. The cat sensed Dad was uncomfortable with her, so if he ever tried to pick her up, she was over it in about three seconds. But when I held the cat, she purred as long as I scratched. Yes, for me it was a good feeling to be an excellent holder of cats.

What is on your list of talents? Go ahead—make one for yourself. You'll be surprised at how many you have, and you'll be more surprised at how good it makes you feel to add items to your list. Dad and I kept our lists running for a long time! Your list might say that you are a good writer or that you are a loyal friend or that you have a great memory or that you can make great filet mignon (please invite me to dinner!). You can put on your list of talents that you are strong physically and/or emotionally, that you can encourage others, or that you are a good hunter. Taking time to think about what you can do and what you enjoy doing is something that can grow and grow and grow! It can help you at this very moment take an honest look at how you "talk" to yourself, and it can begin the process of changing that talk for the better.

Of course, some of your self-talk is influenced by

positive and negative things people say (or have said) to you. But what you hear and what you allow to enter into your thought process are two entirely different things. What you say to yourself is still your choice. Only you can control the words that drive your journey. Only you can control that inner voice.

Think of yourself as a bar of gold—you are worth a lot! Think of yourself as a piece of chocolate—people love you! Think of yourself as oxygen—you might feel invisible at times but you are vital to life on this planet! Use the power of words to drive yourself to great joy and watch the awesome phenomenon of that positive influence overflowing into places you never imagined. You'll see happiness and confidence spread to your kids, your family, your friends, your co-workers, and even strangers. Remember, it's *your* choice! You can do it!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I Was Blind but Now I See

“Vision is the art of seeing things invisible to others.”

—Jonathan Swift

January 31, 1973. The sheets are so white they could be used for a Clorox commercial. The crisp, white corners disappear into the four blue-gray walls that form the tiny box of life. Alyson, my identical twin sister, is in the incubator next to mine. Born nearly three months premature, we barely tip the scales. She is 2 lbs. 6 oz. and I am three ounces less than that. And because we are in a small town hospital with no Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, the hope is simply that we can be kept as comfortable as possible while we wait for our inevitable death. Someone calls in a priest to read our last rites. The doctor tells my mother that we will not live through the night. And everyone waits. And waits. And waits.

And nothing happens.

By the grace of God, three decades have passed and Aly and I are both alive! I guess either the doctor was wrong or it has been a very long night. In fact, I think my mom might have asserted the latter a few times during my teen years. Either way, I can say without a shadow of

a doubt that the fact that we are both living today is a miracle.

An over-exposure to oxygen in the incubator caused me to have such a severe vision loss that some people feel sorry for me. But many understood that blindness is a far better alternative than the other likely outcome I faced. People have always said that God must have some big plans in store for me if I survived such an ordeal at birth.

I agree that He does, but let's put some things into perspective. Surviving a premature birth is not the prerequisite for being a miracle, nor is it required for a life to be specifically planned with a purpose. If you can say that I am a walking miracle, then I can say the same about you. The fact that YOU are breathing today is a miracle. Even if you had an uncomplicated birth and nothing seemed unusual about your arrival—you are still a miracle! Even if you do not know the intricacies of how a human life is created in the womb, it is still an undeniable act of grace that you are here. Even if you were born out of wedlock or if you were adopted or if you think you were “an accident,” you can rest in complete confidence that you have been created with *very real purpose* and you are an essential part of the tapestry of life. Nobody is “an accident.” No matter your life history, no matter your circumstances, no matter your surroundings—you are here because you are *supposed* to be here. You are more than valuable. You are priceless. Oh, before you finish this page of text, know that you are priceless! SEE what you have been created for—joyful living and boundless success!

Unfortunately, we live in a world where many people look into a mirror and truly believe they are not good

enough. They long to measure up to Susan or to be as important as Joe. They wish to be loved, to feel safe, to feel appreciated, yet they do not feel they deserve it. But if that were true, why would our Creator have gone through the trouble of making each cell in our body and counting the hairs on our heads?

Just as sure as my life is a miracle, so is yours. Just as sure as I have purpose, so do you. You can look at my circumstances and say I have had an amazing, front-loaded life. You can say I have had many opportunities to develop perspective and faith. You're right. But you have the same opportunities in your life. Your opportunities might not be as dramatic as being blind or surviving cancer or having a twin or being a collegiate cheerleader or getting run over by a blind skier. But they are *still* opportunities! It is up to you to use those opportunities to let life seep into your soul.

Just knowing that much is enough to give you an entirely new perspective on life! It makes waking up in the morning an entirely new process and gives an entirely new joy! Just knowing that you are capable of participating in your own happiness and success because you can make life choices and learn from life experiences will open your eyes! It certainly has done that for me.

And as I walk through life now, I still see the image. The sheets are so white they could be used for a Clorox commercial. The crisp, white corners disappear into the four blue-gray walls that form the tiny box of life. I lift my eyes to peer out of the windows, but this time it is different. I've experienced life for a while. The journey I have traveled thus far has shown me so much. I lost my

sight as an infant, yet I have gained vision with each new day, each new trial, and each new success. I have learned to live with laughter and friendship and loyalty. I've survived trial and despair and deception and cruelty. I have known death and I have known life. I have gained knowledge and wisdom and courage and perseverance. I have beaten the odds and I have learned to adapt and overcome. But the best things in life I have learned are the things I can scarcely say without jumping for joy. I have learned to have vision with hope, peace, love, faith, and grace. It is the vision that you, too, can have. You can drop your doubts and pick up your pride right this minute. Today is the day you can see that you are intended for greatness and joy. We have all been given the greatest gift of amazing grace. For a part of my life, I was blind. But now I see. Don't you?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hindsight is not 20/20

*“The very essence of leadership is that
you have to have a vision.”
—Theodore Hesburgh*

Have you ever wished life had automatic do-overs? Every time we had that 20/20 hindsight we could just yell, “TIME OUT! DO-OVER!” This feature would come in handy in times when we find ourselves saying something like, “Oh, if I had known that cop was going to be parked there I would not have sped through the school zone!” Or how about, “I would have kept my mouth shut about my boss if I had known the walls were so thin at the office!” Have you been there? Do you wish you had 20/20 hindsight then? Reaching for the do-over rule?

I can honestly say I have not been there. Oh, yes, I have temporarily regretted things I have done and I have said things I wanted to take back. But I have never wanted the advantage of hindsight because I don’t believe that hindsight is really 20/20. I mean really, who made that up? 20/20 is the way a doctor indicates visual acuity of perfect eyesight. If we use the term “hindsight” with 20/20, it implies that it is easy to look back at something

after it has happened and see all the “right” choices that should have been made in the first place. But what do we know? As far as modern science has come, nobody has ever gotten to go back in time and see if the choices seen with 20/20 hindsight would have actually been right!

As a premature infant, I received too much oxygen in the incubator. This was the result of human error—a mistake that has left me severely visually impaired for the rest of my life. In retrospect, the people in charge of my care during infancy could have made different choices and avoided damage to my eyes. If only they had that elusive 20/20 hindsight ahead of time!

But would these corrections have been *right*? Maybe so, if we are just talking in terms of fixing my eyesight. I cannot deny the fact that I would love to be able to enjoy life in a sighted world. What I would not give to hop in the car for a drive on a stressful day! I dream of being able to watch my children across the playground or work on the computer without having my face right up to the monitor. I dream of all the things I miss in life because I simply do not see them. Of course it would be great for me if the medical staff in charge of my care had use of 20/20 hindsight to protect my vision! All the “problems” I have would be eliminated, right?

No. Not right. Many people would call me crazy for not wanting to go back and fix my eyes if given the chance. But living my life has taught me that there is much more to the equation than just my physical ability to see. It is not *just* about me. If that 20/20 hindsight had been used during my infancy, my eyes would work, but a lot of things bigger than eyesight would have been sacrificed.

First of all, lives would have been lost. The accident that caused my disability brought forth corrective actions on the part of the hospital, including the establishment of a Special Care Nursery that saves countless newborn babies every year. Although it is intangible, I am certain my case and others like it have created a heightened sense of awareness for hospital staff when administering oxygen to premature infants. That extra attention to detail most certainly saves the eyesight of many babies and prevents a host of other problems.

On a personal level, my disability has afforded me many unique opportunities to help others because I face an adversity that people are interested in learning about. Blindness has often flushed out friends who were too shallow to see beyond my crooked eyes, which generally leaves me with a genuine and loyal support system of friends. Blindness has given me compassion and understanding and patience and tenacity. Life in these circumstances has truly opened my eyes.

It makes perfect sense to me. If I could live life all over again, I'd leave it exactly as it happened. I believe that is the way it was supposed to be, and I choose to look forward. Not backward.

That is the challenge I now give to you. Don't get stuck looking backwards at life. Don't spend time wondering, "Why me?" or being a coulda-shoulda-woulda person. It's an absolute waste of all the good things we have going for us already! The moment we try to use so-called 20/20 hindsight to run our lives, we turn to see what is behind us and we lose sight of all the things in front of us! It is really nothing more than a way of making us totally blind

to everything on the path ahead. It's like turning the engine of a train around backwards and expecting it to pull the cars by moving in reverse. It makes no sense at all!

The 20/20 vision of this book is my inspiration and my choice, as much as it is yours. Choose to have foresight rather than hindsight. Take hold of the miraculous life you have been graciously given and *live it*. Learn from yesterday because that creates wisdom. Live for today because that creates joy. Look for tomorrow because that creates hope. That is true 20/20 vision.

Resources

With the exception of those noted below, all quotes beneath chapter titles are from:

To Inspire.Com, (Online). (March 31, 2000)
Available <http://www.toinspire.com> (3 Nov. 2003)

It's All In How You Look at It

Quote beneath chapter title is from:
Inspiration Peak, (Online). (no date) Available
<http://www.inspirationpeak.com> (17 Dec. 2003)

“Different” is “Normal!”

1. To Inspire.Com, (Online). (March 31, 2000)
Available <http://www.toinspire.com> (3 Nov. 2003)
2. The World of Leo Buscaglia, (Online). (24 Nov. 2003)
Available <http://www.buscaglia.com> (2 Jan 2004)

About the Author

Andrea Kulberg weighed 2 lbs. 3 oz. at birth and survived when nobody said she would. At age 27, she became a survivor again in the face of kidney cancer. Interestingly enough, beating the odds is something Andrea Kulberg has gotten used to.

A complication from her premature birth has left her severely visually impaired but, with the help of a supportive family and a fully sighted identical twin sister, Andrea has learned to overcome incredible challenges in life to find joy and success in amazing places. Andrea is a former World Champion baton twirler, a former All-American and collegiate cheerleader (University of Texas), and she was as an instructor for the National Cheerleaders Association (NCA). She holds a Master's Degree in Education, which she received in 1997 as the Graduate Student of the Year with a 4.0 GPA.

Andrea has had the honor of working extensively with the British Cheerleading Association (BCA) since 1998. She is the Event Director for BCA's National and International Championships held annually in Nottingham, England. She is also the Director of BCA Instructional Staff and Staff Selection Committee. She has worked side-by-side with the best cheerleaders in the UK as the head instructor for cheer camps throughout England

and Wales. Andrea also writes the *Ask Andrea* column of BCA's quarterly journal *Cheerleader Magazine*.

An unforgettable motivational speaker, Andrea has used her unique perspective in life to educate and inspire thousands of children and adults from around the world. Her programs can be tailored to fit the specific needs of your organization. For more information and availability, please contact:

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Keynotes and Available Topics

- “I Was Blind But Now I See” (Christian walk)
- “From Try to Triumphant” (Adversity)
- “Through My Eyes” (Perspective and Life Choices)
- “20/20 Leadership” (Specific Skills of Leadership)
- “The True Spirit of a Champion” (Perseverance)

About the Author: Andrea Kulberg, M. Ed.

Andrea Kulberg suffers from a severe visual impairment due to complications from her premature birth. Born 2 ½ months early, she was not supposed to live through the night. But when she did, blindness became the first of many hurdles that Andrea would face. And so it was. In 1973, along with her fully sighted identical twin sister, Andrea began the journey in which she learned the true meaning of “overcome.”

Incredibly, Andrea was a world champion baton twirler by age 10, competing against athletes who could actually see the baton. She later trained as an elite level athlete within her role as a University of Texas cheerleader and National Cheerleaders Association (NCA) Instructor. After completing her master’s degree in Education as Graduate Student of the Year with a 4.0 GPA, Andrea taught in the classroom before a new diagnosis changed everything: Kidney Cancer (RCC).

The cancer journey also brought a new perspective that gave Andrea the ability to address adversity with audiences around the world, including within the cheerleading and dance industry where she expresses such passion for the leaders of our future.

Andrea is a founding partner of a highly successful international cheerleading and dance competition company called Future Cheer. Based in the UK, Future Cheer is the world’s premiere International Cheer & Dance Competition Event Producer.

Andrea has also partnered with her identical twin, Aly, to create Rock Star U, the platform for inspiring and empowering your “*World Tour of Success*[™].” As motivational speakers and corporate coaches, Aly and Andrea are known as “the coolest motivational speakers EVER,” thriving on adversity and helping people use their God-given gifts and talents to build the very best that their personal and professional brand has to offer.

Andrea celebrates the blessing of everyday life with her husband, Neil, and their two children because, as you might expect... they all Rock!

Motivational Keynotes, Training Sessions, and Audio Tele-Series Topics:

Rock Star 101

Hilarious and Motivational Keynote about personal success for ABSOLUTELY EVERYONE with star quality and of course— fringe benefits!

Brand YOU New!

Learn to stand out when everyone else looks the same! It's time to build your World Tour of Success through the art of GREAT personal and professional branding that gets customers to find you, like you, respect you, line up to see you, and pay you. A LOT!

God Is My Agent, Talk to Him!

Even the best Rock Stars know it is not all about them! Aly & Andrea share the gospel and warm the heart with the truth that surrounds their lives every day: God's grace is sufficient, and His plans are better than ours!

One Show, One Stage, No Regrets.

Take life up a notch— living with an inspired vision for what defines YOUR success every day.

****All topics are fully customizable. Let us know how we can help you!***

Contact Andrea (and Aly!) at Rock Star U:

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/alyandrea>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/alyandandrea>

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/alyandrea>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/alyandandrea>

Radio: <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/alyandandrea>

Our Story: <http://www.AlyandAndrea.com/about>

Are you ready for your World Tour of Success? We'll choreograph, you shine.

Sign up to hear the details: <http://www.alyandandrea.com/events>

We Want to Hear From YOU!

What is Your 20/20 Vision?

You've read about Andrea's perspective. You've heard what her 20/20 vision for joyful living and boundless success has become. Now it's your turn to tell us what you have learned. What has this book, and more importantly, what has your own life taught you about being happy and successful? How have you overcome adversity to make a difference for yourself and for others? Tell us about it! Your story could be featured in a future book, article, or other event directed by Andrea Kulberg and 4-Sight, LLC. Send your story* to:

Rock Star U

Aly & Andrea

www.alyandandrea.com

* Please include your name, address, and phone number with all contributions. All submissions become the property of Rock Star U, LLC upon receipt, and upon confirmation may be used in future print, television, radio, or other events and media anywhere in the world. In the case of print submissions, contributions may be edited. No payment will be made for submissions and items received by Rock Star U, LLC will not be returned.